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Contents

May 2022

FEATURES

12 World Cup 2022 draw
The full story from Doha

44 Dusan Vlahovic
Player biography

56 Special report
How the Super League is finding life in Africa

THE WORLD THIS MONTH
People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 In pictures
10 From the Assistant Editor
11 The month in numbers
14 **Keir Radnedge** Infantino's FIFA tenure
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Barca history repeating itself
18 Ins & Outs
19 Obituaries
21 On the radar

HEADLINERS
22 Liga MX
24 Poland
25 Andriy Yarmolenko

EYEWITNESS
26 Ukraine
30 Brazil
34 Italy
38 Austria

TALENT SCOUT
42 Red Bull starlets

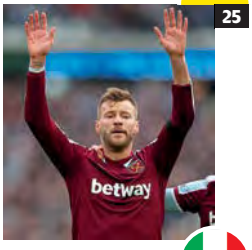
SPECIAL FEATURE
52 Ben Brereton Diaz

FACE TO FACE
60 Andres Iniesta
66 Arnar Vidarsson

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
68 2022 NWSL preview

MY BIGGEST GAME
98 John Aldridge

22



25

34

52

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See page 8

World Service

Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

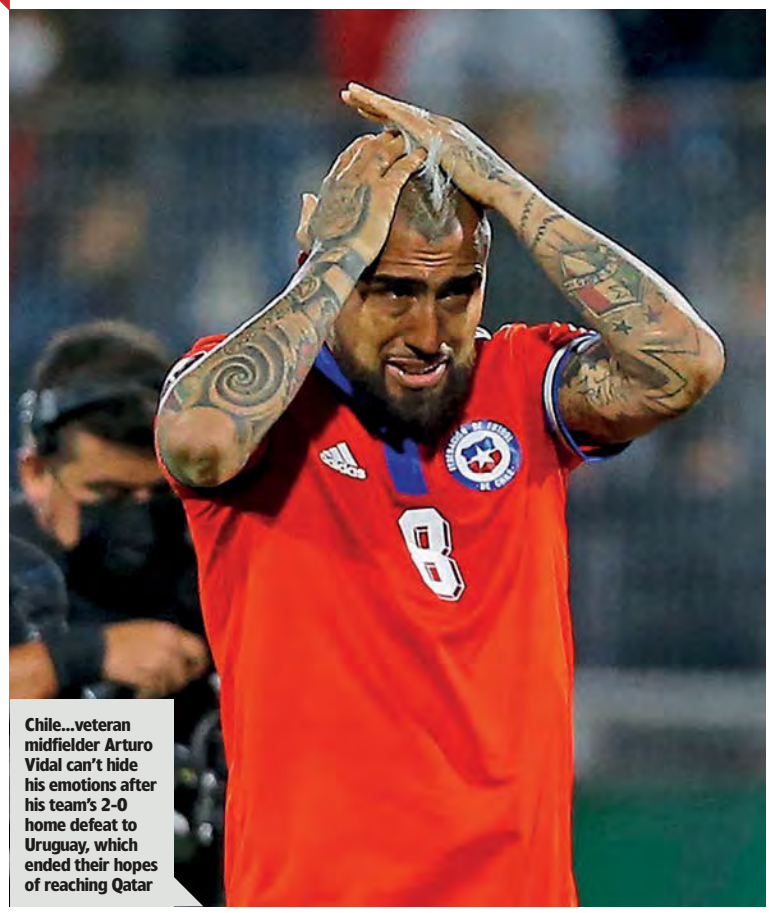
73 Zanzibar giving up on FIFA membership
74 2022 World Cup qualifiers review from Africa, Asia, CONCACAF, Europe, Oceania & South America
86 Copa Libertadores preview
88 African Champions League group stage review
90 Asian Champions League preview

PLUS 72 ESM XI 92 Global diary 94 Results, tables, fixtures

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

Tunisia...national team players celebrate after sealing qualification for the 2022 World Cup



Chile...veteran midfielder Arturo Vidal can't hide his emotions after his team's 2-0 home defeat to Uruguay, which ended their hopes of reaching Qatar

Saudi Arabia...Saudi players salute the fans after beating Australia to clinch their spot at the 2022 World Cup

Australia...Japan winger Kaoru Mitoma celebrates after scoring in his team's 2-0 win over the Socceroos

Italy...Sandro Tonali looks on as North Macedonia celebrate their shock 1-0 win over the Italians in the World Cup play-offs

Canada...fans celebrate after the Canucks hammer Jamaica 4-0 to qualify for their first men's World Cup since 1986

Algeria...national team coach Djamel Belmadi reacts to his side's dramatic defeat to Cameroon in World Cup qualifying

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

This time last year, when Italy and Algeria were in the process of setting world and African records for lengthy unbeaten runs (37 and 35 international games respectively), the idea that neither of them would be present at Qatar for the 2022 World Cup would have been unthinkable. Yet football has a funny way of surprising you.

The surreal situation of European champions Italy missing out on a second consecutive World Cup was summed up by journalist Richard Jolly, who pointed out that former England defender Matthew Upson – whose last cap came in the Three Lions' 4-1 defeat to Germany in South Africa in 2010 – has scored a World Cup knockout goal more recently than the *Azzurri* – a fact that will remain true until 2026 at least. Our man in Rome, Paddy Agnew, reports on the fallout and reaction from the shock defeat to North Macedonia in this issue.

After such results, it is not uncommon to hear the words "disaster" or "tragedy", yet the situation in Ukraine offers a sharp sense of perspective

After such results, it is not uncommon to hear the words "disaster" or "tragedy", yet the current situation in Ukraine offers a sharp sense of perspective. Still, football has played its part in the response to Russia's invasion; Oleg Zadernovsky reports from inside Ukraine, while Dariusz Kurowski reveals the response from football clubs in neighbouring Poland.

Elsewhere we've got a full round-up of March's World Cup qualifiers, reports from Mexico and Brazil, a closer look at the future of African club football, plus an exclusive interview from Japan with Spain legend Andres Iniesta. Enjoy.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

Likely final host...Wembley

EUROPE

UK and Ireland likely to host Euro 2028

A collaborative bid from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland looks set to win hosting rights for the European Championship in 2028 after submitting a joint expression of interest to UEFA by March's deadline.

Initially it was the only declaration, until Turkey and Russia also declared their interest in staging the tournament. Given that the latter is currently banned from international competitions by both FIFA and UEFA, their bid was universally derided. UEFA even suggested that further sanctions could be taken if they proceed with the bid, putting the home nations in pole position to seal the tournament.

Russia's statement also included an interest in hosting the 2032 tournament, which looks likely to be contested between Italy and Turkey.

EUROPE

'Historic performance' plans for Champions League shelved

UEFA have decided against a controversial proposal for the reformed Champions League for the 2024-25 season.

"We are delighted to have a global brand like Crypto.com join us as a sponsor of the exciting and groundbreaking FIFA World Cup in Qatar"

FIFA announces one of its official sponsors for the 2022 World Cup

When the new-look competition arrives, it will do away with the current group stage format, with a single league table of 36 teams taking its place. Each club will play ten games against ten different opponents.

Under one proposition, clubs with stronger coefficient rankings would be able to qualify for the competition regardless of their league position. Taking this season's Premier League as an example, Manchester United's European history would allow them to leapfrog West Ham United into the Champions League if they finished behind them.

However, according to a report in *The Times*, UEFA have now dropped the plans, amid heavy criticism of the proposals in general, but "is still considering the use of rankings to award one or two places".

Critics have argued that the new-look tournament is simply a means of appeasing the clubs that attempted to set up the European Super League last year, and that this format is essentially the same concept under a different name.

FRANCE

Ballon d'Or reforms

France Football magazine, the organisers of the Ballon d'Or, have announced a number of reforms to their prestigious award.

The headline change is the date, with voters now asked to vote based on season performances rather than over the calendar year, as has been the case since the award's inception in 1956. For example, this year's ceremony will be held in September or October, with the season concluding after the Women's Euro 2022 final in July. The Qatar World Cup will be a factor in the 2023 vote.

In addition, the voting panel will be reduced from 170 to 100 for the men's award, and 50 for the women's.

Coveted... the Ballon d'Or trophy

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

€300,000
Fee paid by Bayern Munich for Borussia Monchengladbach 13-year-old Mike Wisdom.

23
Roma goals scored by Tammy Abraham by the start of April, breaking Gabriel Batistuta's record for strikes in a debut season for the Italian club.

6
Bids made for the ownership of Chelsea before the Premier League's March 18 deadline.

Dream comeback... Eriksen celebrates his goal in Amsterdam

287
Days between Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest at Euro 2020 and his return for Denmark, as the midfielder scored with his first touch against the Netherlands on his international comeback.

49
England goals for Harry Kane, putting him level with Bobby Charlton, four behind Wayne Rooney's all-time record. The Tottenham man also moved ahead of Thierry Henry and Frank Lampard into fifth place on the all-time Premier League list.

134
Northern Ireland caps won by Steven Davis, extending his record as the most-capped male British footballer of all time.

3
Premier League clubs to have scored over 2,000 goals after Liverpool and Arsenal joined Manchester United in surpassing the tally.

5
Substitutes allowed from 2022-23 after Premier League shareholders agreed to the rule change.

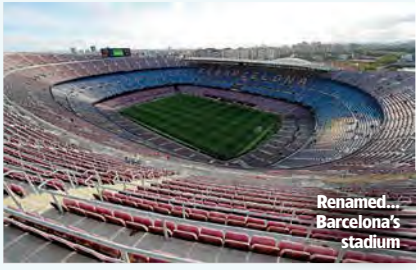
289
Seconds that Atletico Madrid youngster Javier Serrano spent on the pitch for his side's clash with Cadiz, after he was sent off less than five minutes after coming on as a substitute.

2019
Year Hyderabad FC were formed, the new Indian Super League champions, after they beat Kerala Blasters on penalties in the play-off final.

34
Age of Uruguay-born forward Bruno Fornaroli when he received his first call-up by Australia for March's Asian World Cup qualifiers.

£3m
Total prize money for next season's Women's FA Cup, an almost tenfold increase on the current fund of £428,915.

€280m
Reported value of Barcelona's new sponsorship deal with Spotify, which will see their stadium renamed as the "Spotify Camp Nou" from July.



Renamed... Barcelona's stadium

91,553
Fans that attended Barcelona win over Real Madrid in the Women's Champions League, a new record for women's football.

14
Number of years between Cristiano Ronaldo's first Premier League hat-trick (v Newcastle in 2008) and his second (v Tottenham in 2022).

£12.7bn
Projected value of a brand-new marketing deal for Europe's biggest clubs.

WORLD CUP 2022 DRAW

SAMINDRA KUNTI REPORTS FROM DOHA

Qatar 2022 draw provides intrigue and anticipation

No luck of the draw for the hosts. No group of death. Yet the draw for the first World Cup on Arab soil yielded eight intriguing groups that should see most of the powerhouses progress.

As hosts, Qatar were supposed to get a favourable draw – a winnable opening match to get the party going and friendly Group A opponents to keep their knockout-round hopes alive. It's a recipe to keep the tidal wave of enthusiasm and nation-building going during the tournament. In 2010, South Africa became the first host nation to exit in the group stage, despite drawing with Mexico and beating France.

Will Qatar be the second host nation to suffer a similar fate? The draw, which included a star-studded show with the usual hoopla and hyperbole, was not kind to Qatar.

In Group A, they will face Ecuador, the Netherlands and Senegal. The Maroons won the 2019 Asian Cup when they stormed to maiden continental glory with the impressive duo Almoez Ali and Akram Afif up front, but there is a sense the team of coach Felix Sanchez peaked too soon. In 2006, the Spaniard moved to the Aspire Academy where he worked as U19 and U23 national coach before moving up the ladder. He understands better than anyone how Qatar built a competitive national team, helped by the Aspire Academy and the investment of hundreds of millions of riyals.

Final draw...the ceremony in Doha

Surprisingly, the hosts won't open the World Cup, a tradition since 2006. For over a decade, the global finals have been central to Qatar's nation-building and geopolitical ambitions, but the curtain-raiser sees Senegal play the Netherlands on November 21.

Three hours later, Euro 2020 finalists and 2018 World Cup semi-finalists England will be in action against Iran in Group B, home to the United States as well and thus the promise of political intrigue. At the 1998 World Cup, Iran defeated the USA 2-1 in the groups. USA coach Gregg Berhalter says: "We've both grown so much since then...24 years later, the world looks different and we are no longer rivals with Iran. I think we are more friends. There is a ton of mutual respect. Football, fortunately, transcends a lot of the political stuff."

> In 2010, South Africa became the first host nation to exit in the group stage...will Qatar be the second host nation to suffer a similar fate?

But it might all be in vain. Their form has dipped and Sanchez has limited options off the bench. Qatar were lacklustre in last year's Gold Cup, and in December's Arab Cup they fell in the semis, struggling against Egypt and Algeria. They will prepare for months on end, but on the big stage there won't be any respite. Qatar kick off their campaign against Ecuador and it could all be over eight days later.

In Group E, Spain v Germany will be the headline clash, but both former world champions should qualify from their group with ease. Rivals Brazil and Argentina, alongside Saudi Arabia, Mexico and Poland in Group C, can have no complaints. Argentina have been unbeaten for almost three years and for the first time Lionel Messi seems to be truly integrated into the set-up, receiving passes higher up the pitch.

Brazil and coach Tite must have had *déjà vu*, drawing Switzerland and Serbia again. In the quarter-finals, they might meet Belgium, the team that eliminated the five-time world champions from the last World Cup. The 2-1 defeat remains Tite's trauma.

Ever since, he has been tinkering with the balance of his side. Something of the pragmatic and defensive-minded Tite has returned. He is a coach with principles and will not commit to ideals, the way Jorge Sampaoli and Marcelo Bielsa do. The reason is simple: idealism can't topple balance. He doesn't want his team to be exposed again. On the flip side, his side are less fluent. They do however concede very few goals and it will require a top team, perhaps Portugal from Group H, at its best to topple the Brazilians.

Once again the World Cup shapes up to be a clash between Europe and South America. No country outside of those two continents has ever won the global finals, but lately, South America has also been excluded from the party. Europe has won the last four World Cups. The onus, then, is on Brazil and Argentina to break that dominance and reclaim the game's most coveted prize.

Match Schedule

GROUP A

Qatar ● Ecuador ● Senegal ● Netherlands

November 21	Senegal v Netherlands	*(1pm, Al Thumama)*
November 21	Qatar v Ecuador	*(7pm, Al Bayt)*
November 25	Qatar v Senegal	*(4pm, Al Thumama)*
November 25	Netherlands v Ecuador	*(7pm, Khalifa)*
November 29	Ecuador v Senegal	*(6pm, Khalifa)*
November 29	Netherlands v Qatar	*(6pm, Al Bayt)*

GROUP B

England ● Iran ● USA ● Scotland/Ukraine/Wales

November 21	England v Iran	*(4pm, Khalifa)*
November 21	USA v Sco/Ukr/Wal	*(10pm, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
November 25	Sco/Ukr/Wal v Iran	*(1pm, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
November 25	England v USA	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*
November 29	Sco/Ukr/Wal v England	*(10pm, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
November 29	Iran v USA	*(10pm, Al Thumama)*

GROUP C

Argentina ● Saudi Arabia ● Mexico ● Poland

November 22	Argentina v Saudi Arabia	*(1pm, Lusail)*
November 22	Mexico v Poland	*(7pm, Stadium 974)*
November 26	Poland v Saudi Arabia	*(4pm, Education City)*
November 26	Argentina v Mexico	*(10pm, Lusail)*
November 30	Poland v Argentina	*(10pm, Stadium 974)*
November 30	Saudi Arabia v Mexico	*(10pm, Lusail)*

GROUP D

France ● Australia/Peru/UAE ● Denmark ● Tunisia

November 22	Denmark v Tunisia	*(4pm, Education City)*
November 22	France v Aus/Peru/UAE	*(10pm, Al Janoub)*
November 26	Tunisia v Aus/Peru/UAE	*(1pm, Al Janoub)*
November 26	France v Denmark	*(7pm, Stadium 974)*
November 30	Aus/Peru/UAE v Denmark	*(6pm, Al Janoub)*
November 30	Tunisia v France	*(6pm, Education City)*

GROUP E

Spain ● Costa Rica/New Zealand ● Germany ● Japan

November 23	Germany v Japan	*(4pm, Khalifa)*
November 23	Spain v Costa Rica/NZL	*(7pm, Al Thumama)*
November 27	Japan v Costa Rica/NZL	*(1pm, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
November 27	Spain v Germany	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*
December 1	Japan v Spain	*(10pm, Khalifa)*
December 1	Costa Rica/NZL v Germany	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*

GROUP F

Belgium ● Canada ● Morocco ● Croatia

November 23	Morocco v Croatia	*(1pm, Al Bayt)*
November 23	Belgium v Canada	*(10, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
November 27	Belgium v Morocco	*(4pm, Al Thumama)*
November 27	Croatia v Canada	*(7pm, Khalifa)*
December 1	Croatia v Belgium	*(6pm, Ahmad Bin Ali)*
December 1	Canada v Morocco	*(6pm, Al Thumama)*

GROUP G

Brazil ● Serbia ● Switzerland ● Cameroon

November 24	Switzerland v Cameroon	*(1pm, Al Janoub)*
November 24	Brazil v Serbia	*(10pm, Lusail)*
November 28	Cameroon v Serbia	*(1pm, Al Janoub)*
November 28	Brazil v Switzerland	*(7pm, Stadium 974)*
December 2	Serbia v Switzerland	*(10pm, Stadium 974)*
December 2	Cameroon v Brazil	*(10pm, Lusail)*

GROUP H

Portugal ● Ghana ● Uruguay ● South Korea

November 24	Uruguay v South Korea	*(4pm, Education City)*
November 24	Portugal v Ghana	*(7pm, Stadium 974)*
November 28	South Korea v Ghana	*(4pm, Education City)*
November 28	Portugal v Uruguay	*(10pm, Lusail)*
December 2	Ghana v Uruguay	*(6pm, Al Janoub)*
December 2	South Korea v Portugal	*(6pm, Education City)*

ROUND OF 16

December 3	Winner A v Runner-Up B (1)	*(6pm, Khalifa)*
December 3	Winner C v Runner-Up D (2)	*(10pm, A.B. Ali)*
December 4	Winner D v Runner-Up C (3)	*(6pm, Al Thumama)*
December 4	Winner B v Runner-Up A (4)	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*
December 5	Winner E v Runner-Up F (5)	*(6pm, Al Janoub)*
December 5	Winner G v Runner-Up H (6)	*(10pm, Stadium 974)*
December 6	Winner F v Runner-Up E (7)	*(6pm, Education City)*
December 6	Winner H v Runner-Up G (8)	*(10pm, Lusail)*

QUARTER-FINALS

December 9	Winner 5 v Winner 6 (A)	*(6pm, Education City)*
December 9	Winner 1 v Winner 2 (B)	*(10pm, Lusail)*
December 10	Winner 7 v Winner 8 (C)	*(6pm, Al Thumama)*
December 10	Winner 4 v Winner 3 (D)	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*

SEMI-FINALS

December 13	Winner QF B v Winner QF A (1)	*(10pm, Lusail)*
December 14	Winner QF D v Winner QF C (2)	*(10pm, Al Bayt)*

THIRD PLACE PLAY-OFF

December 17	Loser SF 1 v Loser SF 2	*(6pm, Khalifa)*

FINAL

December 18	Winner SF 1 v Winner SF 2	*(6pm, Lusail)*

● *all kick-off times are local time*

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Infantino's FIFA tenure – the good, the bad and the ugly

Gianni Infantino, barring cataclysm (not to be ruled out these days), is expecting to be re-elected next year as president of FIFA for a further four years. The jury is out on the balance of his reign thus far.

The 52-year-old Swiss lawyer was voted in six years ago to complete the last three years of Sepp Blatter's fifth term, and then won the top job in world football in his own right in 2019.

Under the current rules – which he could always seek to rewrite – a president may serve "only" three full terms. This means that Infantino may seek a further re-election in 2027, preside over the 2030 World Cup and then retire to the luxury of five-star travel, accommodation and VIP seating for the rest of his life.

That would add up to a total of 15 years in office, inferior only to the World Cup's founding father Jules Rimet (33), Brazilian autocrat Joao Havelange (24) and the banned and disgraced Blatter (17).

Europe, having enthusiastically voted Infantino into office in 2016, would now happily ditch him without a moment's hesitation. The reason is simple: Infantino, like all but one of FIFA's previous eight presidents, may be European but his authority and job security depends on the world outside.

The bitter irony for UEFA is that its powerbrokers were happy to raise up their own general secretary then furious when he failed to display due gratitude in serving their own needs out of FIFA's granite-and-glass HQ across the road from Zurich Zoo.

Bear in mind that the richest of FIFA's members are only a small minority of the 211-strong membership. The majority middle-class and minnow nations are satisfied with Infantino. They love the way he quadrupled development largesse (OK, so tighter controls demand more creative accounting), love his expansion of the World Cup to 48 teams and love his dream of staging it every two years.

If you lead the impoverished FA of Cuba or Botswana or Cambodia or Tahiti and dozens more then what is not to like? This is all lost on Europe and on a highly-critical Eurocentric western media. But not on a majority of the FAs who each hold one vote in FIFA Congress.

Women's football is the one sphere in which Infantino has proceeded without demur. His most significant step has been to establish the financial independence of the Women's World Cup.

Until now the Women's World Cup was merely one of the dozen additional bits and pieces which were "bundled up" for all FIFA's multinational (men's) World Cup sponsors. No longer. The Women's World Cup now commands its own sponsorship slots which, already, permit a doubling of prize money.

One day this may be viewed among the most notable achievements of a reign which began in Zurich back in February 2016 when Infantino defeated Asian confederation president Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa 115 votes to 88 in a run-off. The first ballot had seen off Prince Ali of Jordan, Frenchman Jerome Champagne and South Africa's Tokyo Sexwale.

Infantino's rise was remarkable.

Blatter quit in summer 2015 after the United States Justice Department laid bare how a greedy bunch of bosses on the FIFA executive committee had feasted financially on World Cup contracts.

Michel Platini, then president of UEFA, was favourite for the job he had always coveted. However Platini was then suspended by FIFA after details emerged of Blatter's payment to him of $2m for work undertaken within FIFA years earlier.

Under the spotlight...FIFA president Gianni Infantino in Qatar for the 2021 Arab Cup

> Europe, having enthusiastically voted Infantino into office in 2016, would now happily ditch him without a moment's hesitation

UEFA had to come up in a hurry with an alternative candidate for the FIFA presidency to "protect its own interests". None of Europe's high-flying FA presidents wanted it and thus chose Infantino to fight the battle for them.

Infantino, once enthroned, set to work with a will. His job had almost been done for him. US justice, FIFA's briefly-independent ethics committee and a reform programme cleaned out the exco (subsequently converted and expanded into a rubber-stamp FIFA Council).

Along the way Infantino threw overboard all senior staff from the Blatter regime, including men and women who had tried to distance themselves from their superiors' venality. He raided UEFA for senior officials on whose loyalty he could count and created the Legends programme for compliant old heroes to trot out his party line to a star-struck football media.

Infantino made a priority of rebuilding FIFA's tarnished image and sent a dramatic signal of intent to the rest of the world by appointing Fatma Samoura – a black, Muslim, African woman – as secretary-general. UEFA was discovering, to its chagrin, that Infantino was not its puppet.

Infantino was duly re-elected unopposed in 2019 and can look back on a variety of successes. Internally he streamlined the FIFA committees, concentrated power in the bureau (himself and the six confederations presidents) and set up a satellite office in Paris with plans for more in London and the US.

As for the financially all-important World Cup, he presided over a highly successful finals in Russia, the introduction of VAR, a raft of new sponsors then the expansion to 48 teams for a first triple hosting in Canada, Mexico and the US in 2026. To ensure everything goes to plan in Qatar later this year he and his family have set up home in Doha where he plans to spend half his time.

Politically, Infantino's focus is Africa with its all-important 54 votes. He supported Madagascar's Ahmed Ahmed in ousting long-serving Issa Hayatou as CAF president but soon realised he had backed the wrong horse. South Africa billionaire Patrice Motsepe is now proving a more pliant successor.

Infantino has plenty of goodies in store if only CAF can pull its act together. Think African Super League (more on that on page 56) for starters. Never mind that Infantino lined up dutifully with UEFA in deriding the concept for Europe.

In the wider sphere Infantino has led football into and out of the COVID-19 pandemic, attained membership of the International Olympic Committee and strutted his stuff at gatherings of the United Nations, European Parliament, Council of Europe and even the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Critics may have derided his appearances in such diverse theatres as egotistical masquerades. However, from the other side of the looking glass, whatever personal pride he may glean serves his mission to see FIFA re-established as a trustworthy partner on the grand international stage.

This is important but, in terms of media headlines, has been outweighed by the two issues which have stoked European fury.

The first, early in Infantino's presidency, was his misjudged secret attempt to find a cash guarantor for an expanded Club World Cup. The project effectively vanished from sight after the calendar shuffles prompted by COVID and may not see the light of day again for a very long time. Few tears have been shed.

Currently Infantino is entangled needlessly in what should have been a comparatively simple reform of the international match calendar. This project fell foul of a distractingly unnecessary proposal to stage the World Cup every two years.

All this may yet pale beyond what threatens to provide the greatest test of Infantino's political skills and judgment. As president of FIFA he will have to take the ultimate position on what was once defined by Winston Churchill as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That is, Russia.

No keeping up the pretence about separating sport and politics here after the military invasion of Ukraine. Infantino should become more wary about all those photo-opportunities portraying him happily glad-handing the likes of Vladimir Putin and Mohammed bin Salman.

How Infantino responds may define his presidency and his presidential personality. He lacks the father-figure benevolence of Rimet or the patrician authority of Sir Stanley Rous or the glowering gravitas of Havelange or the bouncy bonhomie of Blatter. He is a leader for a technocratic age and how that era will evolve who can tell?

At least Infantino, if nothing else, has time on his side.

Rubbing shoulders...Infantino and Russia president Vladimir Putin ahead of the 2018 World Cup

BOOKS THIS MONTH

THE O'LEARY YEARS
By Rocco Dean (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

The O'Leary Years charts the rise and fall of Leeds United at the turn of the 21st century. The journey lasted four seasons under David O'Leary, each one a rollercoaster, and the often-scorned club enjoyed popularity like never before. But things are never straightforward at Elland Road. Off-the-pitch controversies and a "spend, spend, spend" attitude would eventually bring the club to its knees, but not before it was one match from reaching its holy grail: a European Cup final rematch with Bayern Munich.

WEST HAM UNITED
By Jack Fawbert (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

West Ham United: From East End Family to Globalised Fandom is the story of the evolution of West Ham. It charts how a works football team was transformed into a club that represented east London's working classes, only to be transformed again in the late 20th and early 21st centuries into a global brand with supporters in every habitable place on Earth.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Is Nou Camp history repeating itself?

In 2000, Real Madrid signed Luis Figo from Barcelona. It was a transfer that had profound consequences. Madrid didn't just take one of Barca's best players; they also sent them into a panic. Humiliated, Barca felt an urge to assert themselves by spending, precipitating a financial meltdown. Joan Laporta was elected president, and sought to return the club to its tactical roots, appointing Frank Rijkaard as coach. Three years later, Barca won the Champions League.

In 2017, Paris Saint-Germain signed Neymar from Barcelona. It was a transfer that had profound consequences. PSG didn't just take one of Barca's best players; they also sent them into a panic. Humiliated, Barca felt an urge to assert themselves by spending, precipitating a financial meltdown. Joan Laporta was elected president, and sought to return the club to its tactical roots, appointing Xavi as coach. In the present circumstances, winning the Champions League in three years seems a long way off, but after the 4-0 victory away to Real Madrid in March, a brighter future at least seems possible.

***El Clasico*...Barca's players celebrate their 4-0 thrashing of Real Madrid**

Lionel Messi, who is widely believed to have set the tempo in training, has left the club. Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique, notably, have seemed rejuvenated. As when Guardiola took over, there is a highly-gifted younger generation just beginning to emerge, who seem not only to relish the challenge but who are ideally equipped for the intensity Xavi demands. Gavi came off the bench with 19 minutes to go in the *Clasico* and won five duels – more than anybody on the Madrid side during the entire game.

> As when Guardiola took over, there is a highly-gifted younger generation just beginning to emerge, who seem ideally equipped for the intensity Xavi demands

Xavi acknowledged that the win was reminiscent of Barcelona's 2-1 win at the Bernabeu in April 2004, a game in which he scored a late winner. But there are reminders here of Barcelona after Pep Guardiola had replaced Rijkaard. A lax culture had developed, which Guardiola tackled by offloading Ronaldinho and Deco. Barcelona's habitual Champions League collapses had suggested that fitness had become a problem, and Xavi has tackled it with specific programmes devised by his conditioning coach Ivan Torres.

In that regard it may help that

The easy explanation is that Xavi has re-imposed the classic Barcelona philosophy – but it's slightly more complicated than that. One of the greatest tricks Guardiola pulled was to make clubs think that they have a DNA. But the truth is, most don't. There were lots of fine words when Manchester United appointed Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Chelsea Frank Lampard, as though they were installing some kind of shaman who could tap into the club's deepest nature. But most of the greatest managers in the history of the game – Herbert Chapman, Vittorio Pozzo, Marton Bukovi, Bill Shankly, Viktor Maslov, Helenio Herrera, Don Revie, Valeriy Lobanovskyi, Arrigo Sacchi, Arsene Wenger – transformed the culture of their clubs. For most teams, appointing former stars does nothing more than buying time: supporters will be more patient with a manager they have loved as a player.

Coaching...Xavi instructs his players at the Bernabeu

Guardiola was a DNA appointment at Barcelona. His experience on taking that job amounted to one season in charge of the reserves. He was an illogical choice in any number of ways. And yet it brought three successive La Liga titles and two Champions Leagues and changed the parameters of what was considered possible in football. Every club then wanted their own Guardiola, leading to a string of dreadful appointments that, paradoxically, made it easier for Guardiola to dominate.

In part that's because Guardiola is an exceptional coach. But it's also because not every club is Barcelona. Perhaps only at Ajax, which of course shares much of the Barca philosophy, is a style of play so deeply embedded at the club both practically and symbolically.

Xavi was always a devotee of the philosophy, so much so that at times it was as though he saw football as a battle for what was right, which is to say the Barcelona way of playing. The doubt was that he was just spouting the doctrine, without necessarily having the wherewithal to reimagine it for this squad in this age. But that fear is beginning to recede.

His Barcelona is recognisably Barcelona, but this is not just a reheated version of the football of 15 years ago. In his days as a player, *Clasicos* were won in midfield, with control born in part of pressing but mainly of possession – which is why Jose Mourinho tried to combat Barcelona's strength in that area by fielding three holding players, the notorious "*Trivote*". This Barca is much more direct, frequently playing long diagonals over the press out to the wingers, Ferran Torres and Ousmane Dembele, who tended to stay wide, which in turn meant more conservative full-backs. Pressing has changed over the past decade and a half, and so must ways of combating it.

The *Clasico* was one game. It was just a step, albeit a major one, in the right direction. But already Xavi is looking like the coach who might oversee this latest Barcelona resurrection.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Disastrous celebration... Kiril Despodov

1 A RASH RED

International friendlies might have a reputation for being boring, but we'd defy anyone not to be entertained during the 69th minute of Croatia versus Bulgaria in March. Bulgarian winger Kiril Despodov was the star of the show, expertly racing on to a through ball before calmly slotting past the Croatian keeper to put his team in front. He duly celebrated like Cristiano Ronaldo, tearing off his shirt and bellowing the Portuguese's trademark "siu" shout. Yet his joy was short-lived; seconds later the referee showed him a second yellow card for removing his top, and sent him off. Croatia then bounced back to win the game 2-1 in Qatar.

2 BANGKOK KNOCKOUT

Scuffles during games are hardly new, but Bangkok FC's clash with North Bangkok University descended into a Muay Thai boxing match when Aitsaret Noichaiboon reacted angrily to a trip by an opponent. The player threw an elbow strike at Supasan Ruangsuphanimit, leaving him needing 24 stitches. Noichaiboon was instantly sent off, and had his contract cancelled after the game.

3 "THAT'S NOT FUNNY"

You might not expect to hear the words "*Braveheart*" mentioned so often during a post-match Bundesliga press conference, but that's exactly what happened after Hertha Berlin's 3-0 win over Hoffenheim. "That's not funny what you're saying about *Braveheart*," said Scottish coach Mark Fotheringham – in fluent German – when asked whether he had shown his team the Mel Gibson film. "I'm a serious, young coach. I've learned a lot. I don't know what you mean by that – about *Braveheart* and so on. What's that all about?" Fotheringham was standing in for new Hertha boss Felix Magath, who had contracted COVID-19.

4 SNAKES ON A PITCH

There were bizarre scenes in Guatemala recently, as a snake interrupted a match between Nueva Concepcion and Municipal. According to reports, the reptile was as long as 1.5 metres, scattering frightened players in all directions. After police finally forced it down with riot shields, the snake was eventually carried off the pitch and the match continued.

5 EXPLOSIVE DERBY

For the players of Rosario Central and Newell's Old Boys, a snake on the pitch would have been a welcome sight after the delay to their fixture. The pre-match build-up ahead of the Rosario derby – one of Argentina's fiercest rivalries – got a little out of hand when a fan threw a hand grenade onto the pitch. "Kick-off is being delayed as the referee is briefed by the Head of Security," read a tweet from Newell's. "A number of grenades that were thrown onto the pitch have made holes in the pitch."

6 NEXT BEN BRERETON?

Ben Brereton Diaz made headlines all over the world as a lad from Stoke who became a star in the Chilean national team. Now, a similar story could be unfolding in the shape of Bury-born Callum Styles, who made his international debut for Hungary in March. "I only found out that my grandmother was Hungarian about two years ago," he said after his first call-up. The 22-year-old midfielder came on for the last 20 minutes of the 1-0 defeat to Serbia, before starting against Northern Ireland a few days later. Hungary's next game? England at Wembley.

"Hungary" for more... Callum Styles in action against Northern Ireland

"It is to do with family matters, but I'd rather not go into detail. At this point in time, I wanted to spend time with my family. I did not go with the Russian team [but that was] not because of political aspects"

Zenit Saint Petersburg striker Artem Dzyuba after declining an international call-up by Russia

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Back in the Bundesliga... Felix Magath

EUROPE

Following the departure of Marcelo Bielsa, Leeds United appointed **JESSE MARSCH** as their new head coach.

Dutch giants PSV announced that **RUUD VAN NISTELROOY** will replace Roger Schmidt as coach this summer – his first senior managerial role.

Relegation-threatened Hertha Berlin appointed former Stuttgart, Bayern Munich, Wolfsburg and Fulham boss **FELIX MAGATH** as coach until the end of the season, replacing Tayfun Korkut.

Cypriot side Omonia Nicosia appointed former Celtic boss **NEIL LENNON** as their new manager.

Belgian club Antwerp appointed **MARC OVERMARS** as their new technical director – just weeks after he was dismissed by Ajax for sending inappropriate messages to female colleagues. Elsewhere, Charleroi signed former Belgium Under-21 forward **ISAAC MBENZA** following his release by Qatar SC.

New job... Overmars

NUNO CAMPOS replaced Rafa Benitez's former assistant Pako Ayestaran as coach of Portuguese Primeira Liga side Tondela.

Former Atletico Madrid manager **JAVIER AGUIRRE** took charge of Mallorca, replacing Luis Garcia.

Besiktas appointed former Barnsley and West Bromwich Albion manager **VALERIEN ISMAEL** as their new head coach. Elsewhere in Turkey, Goztepe hired **STJEPAN TOMAS** to replace the sacked Nestor El Maestro.

Young Rangers midfielder **CHARLIE McCANN** switched his international eligibility to Northern Ireland after playing for Republic of Ireland's youth teams.

Republic of Ireland midfielder **HARRY ARTER** joined Notts County on loan from Nottingham Forest.

ASIA

Barcelona native **LLUIS PLANAGUMA** took charge of Vissel Kobe, linking up with Andres Iniesta, replacing the sacked Atsuhiro Miura. The J.League side also signed **KENTO HASHIMOTO** on loan from Rostov.

Chinese Super League side Wuhan Three Towns signed Romania winger **NICOLAE STANCIU** from Slavia Prague.

CONCACAF

MLS Cup champions New York City FC signed 20-year-old Brazilian forward **GABRIEL PEREIRA** from Corinthians.

SOUTH AMERICA

Former Santos, Flamengo and Athletico Paranaense coach **DORIVAL JUNIOR** took charge of Ceara.

Ecuador international **JHOJAN JULIO** joined Santos on loan from LDU Quito, and former Real Betis defender **SIDNEI** joined top-flight side Goias from second-tier Cruzeiro.

Botafogo embarked on a recruitment spree, signing former Chelsea youngster **LUCAS PIAZON** on loan from Braga and winger **JOAO VICTOR** from Al Jazira, while also paying Palmeiras £5 million for midfielder **PATRICK DE PAULA**.

Copa Libertadores winner... Patrick De Paula

Russian exodus

A number of players and coaches departed the Russian Premier League in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Former Norwich City boss Daniel Farke stepped down from his new role at Krasnodar without taking charge of a game, while former Newcastle United forward Remy Cabella and Sweden winger Viktor Claesson also walked away from the club, with Poland international Grzegorz Krychowiak and Brazilian Wanderson joining AEK Athens and Internacional, respectively, on loan until the end of the season.

Elsewhere, Ukraine centre-back Yaroslav Rakitskyi quit Zenit Saint Petersburg, Royal Antwerp striker Didier Lamkel Ze cancelled his loan at Khimki, Pontus Almqvist joined Utrecht from Rostov until the end of the season and Georgia forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia left Rubin Kazan for Dinamo Batumi on loan.

Quick departure...Daniel Farke

EUROPE

Former Arsenal and France defender **LAURENT KOSCIELNY** announced his retirement from football having been phased out of Bordeaux's first team.

Roma attacking midfielder **HENRIKH MKHITARYAN** ended his international career at the age of 33 after scoring a record 32 goals in 95 appearances for

"I'm not going to advise [Erik], he'll call me himself. But he must choose a football club and not a commercial club…Manchester United are a commercial club, so it's a difficult choice for a coach"

Louis van Gaal offers words of warning for Ajax boss Erik ten Hag amid media reports linking him to the Manchester United job

Appointments, sackings and loans

Armenia. Turkey captain **BURAK YILMAZ** also hung up his international boots, with his final game coming in the team's 3-1 defeat to Portugal, when he missed a penalty in the 85th minute. The Lille striker finished with 31 goals in 77 games for the Crescent-Stars.

Former Celtic and Scotland midfielder **SCOTT BROWN** left Aberdeen to pursue a coaching career, bringing an end to his playing days.

Ex-England striker **JERMAIN DEFOE** announced his retirement from football, just months after re-joining former club Sunderland. He ends his career ninth in the list of all-time Premier League top scorers with 162 goals.

Retired…Defoe celebrates scoring for the Three Lions at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa

FRANCO FODA resigned from his job as Austria coach, with the friendly draw with Scotland his final match in charge.

ROBERTO MORENO was sacked by La Liga side Granada. In Switzerland, former Huddersfield Town boss **DAVID WAGNER** was sacked by Young Boys, while Basel also fired their head coach, **PATRICK RAHMEN**.

CONCACAF

New York Red Bulls signed former Manchester United youngster **ASHLEY FLETCHER** on loan from Watford.

SOUTH AMERICA

Ex-Southampton boss **MAURICIO PELLEGRINO** left Argentine giants Velez Sarsfield after two years in charge. Elsewhere, former Valencia winger **KILY GONZALEZ** left his role as Rosario Central boss.

Sacked…Mauricio Pellegrino

OBITUARIES

Tomas BOY
(1951-2022)
A hugely significant figure in the history of Mexican football, having captained the national team on home soil at the 1986 World Cup. Known as "*El Jefe*" (The Boss), Boy was known for his dribbling and vision, as well as his ability to score from long range, and spent the vast majority of his career at Tigres with whom he won two league titles and a Mexican Cup. After retiring in 1988 he managed a number of clubs, leaving his last job in May 2021.

***El Jefe*…Tomas Boy**

Egidius BRAUN
(1925-2022)
A long-serving German football administrator, Braun was the eighth president of the German Football Association (DFB) from 1992 to 2001, overseeing the early years of reunification and Germany's famous victory at Euro '96 in England. During the same period he also served as vice-president of UEFA.

Titus BUBERNIK
(1933-2022)
Former defender and a member of the Czechoslovakian squad that reached the final of the 1962 World Cup.

Justice CHRISTOPHER
(1981-2022)
A former Nigeria midfielder who played in all three of his country's games at the 2002 World Cup. Enjoyed a nomadic club career with spells in Benin, Russia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark and Nigeria.

Raimon CARRASCO
(1924-2022)
Carrasco is in the Barcelona history books as the club's last president before the introduction of democratic elections. The businessman took charge for an interim period in the 1977-78 campaign, before being replaced by Josep Lluis Nunez, who served as president for 22 years. During his brief tenure, Barca won the 1978 Copa del Rey, with a team managed by Rinus Michels and inspired by Johan Cruyff.

Remembered… Barcelona and Real Madrid players hold a minute's silence for Carrasco ahead of *El Clasico*

"He was a talented manager and a man of unimpeachable integrity…we will always be grateful for his willingness to take the tiller at such a tricky point in the club's history"

Manchester United pay tribute to their former manager Frank O'Farrell

Naci ERDEM
(1931-2022)
Former Fenerbahce and Galatasaray centre-back, who also won 31 caps for Turkey between 1954 and 1965.

Tony MARCHI
(1933-2022)
A member of the Tottenham Hotspur team that won the 1960-61 league title and European Cup Winners' Cup two years later. Having started his career at the North London club, those two trophies came after a two-year spell in Italy, where he played for Vicenza and Torino on loan from Juventus. After retiring, he managed Cambridge City and Northampton Town.

Tottenham hero…Tony Marchi, aged 17

Gordon LEE
(1934-2022)
After a playing career that featured an 11-year spell at Aston Villa, Lee embarked on a 23-year managerial career. He reached two League Cup finals in back-to-back seasons, first with Newcastle United in 1976 and then with Everton a year later, albeit without getting his hands on the trophy. He spent four years in charge of the Toffees, before being replaced by Howard Kendall in 1981.

Andy LOCHHEAD
(1941-2022)
Only three players have scored more goals for Burnley in the club's history than Lochhead. The Scottish striker joined the Clarets in 1960, before later playing for Leicester City, Aston Villa and Oldham Athletic.

Aime MIGNOT
(1932-2022)
After a playing career featuring more than 400 games for Lyon, placing him fifth on the club's all-time list of appearance makers, the former defender went into management. He coached his former club for eight years before taking charge of Angers, and later spent a decade in charge of the French women's national team. In 1997 he took the team to their first major tournament, the European Championship in Norway and Sweden.

Frank O'FARRELL
(1927-2022)
Perhaps the inheritor of football's original poisoned chalice, O'Farrell succeeded Sir Matt Busby as Manchester United manager in 1971. Despite signing a five-year contract upon his arrival, and guiding the club to top of the table by Christmas of his first season, O'Farrell only lasted 18 months at Old Trafford.

He was appointed at United, under Busby's recommendation, following successful spells at Torquay United and Leicester City. After leaving, he joined Cardiff City, but quit the Welsh club to take charge of Iran, winning the 1974 Asian Games.

O'Farrell arrived in England in 1948, joining West Ham United from Cork. A wing-half, he played 197 league games for the Hammers and 118 for Preston North End, while also winning nine caps for the Republic of Ireland.

United boss… Frank O'Farrell at Old Trafford

Giuseppe WILSON
(1945-2022)
Born in Darlington to an Italian mother and an English father, Wilson grew up in Naples. His professional career began at the now defunct Internapoli, playing 138 Serie A games, before joining Lazio in 1969. He spent 11 years at the Rome-based club, winning the league title in the 1973-74 campaign. His performances that year earned him an Italy call-up for the 1974 World Cup, where he made two appearances.

Lyon legend…Mignot

Miguel VAN DAMME
(1993-2022)
The Cercle Brugge goalkeeper tragically passed away at the age of just 28 after a five-year battle with leukaemia.

Jurgen GRABOWSKI
(1944-2022)

Tribute… Grabowski is remembered at Frankfurt's stadium

A one-club man who spent his entire career at Eintracht Frankfurt, Grabowski features prominently in the team's record books – when he retired in 1980 he was their all-time appearance record holder with 536 games, while only three players have scored more goals than his 140.

He also holds the record for most international caps won while playing for Frankfurt, having played 44 times for West Germany. He was in the squad for the victorious Euro 1972 campaign, then started the World Cup final two years later, a 2-1 win over the Netherlands.

Grabowski also won back-to-back German Cups with Frankfurt in 1974 and 1975, as well as the 1980 UEFA Cup. He was unable to take part in the final however, having been injured earlier in the season by a tackle from a young Lothar Matthaus. The injury would prove to be fatal for his career – much to the outrage of Frankfurt's loyal fans. In 2001, Matthaus' application for the Eintracht manager's job was derailed by supporter protests, who had not forgotten that tackle some 20 years earlier.

"Florian Wirtz is one of the greatest talents that German football has produced in recent years…I've already phoned him and tried to encourage him. He's still young, he'll come back just as strong"

Germany coach Hansi Flick on the Bayer Leverkusen wonderkid, after he was ruled out for the season with a knee injury

Alejandro GARNACHO

(Manchester United)

For March's World Cup qualifiers against Venezuela and Ecuador, Argentina named a provisional 44-man squad with seven uncapped players aged 18 or under.

The one thing that many of the young talents have in common is the fact that they are eligible for other nations.

Spanish-born Garnacho arrived at Old Trafford from Atletico Madrid in 2020 and has received attention for firing United's U18s to the FA Youth Cup final with five goals, but he is yet to taste senior action.

Indeed, neither have Valentin and Franco Carboni (Inter), Nico Paz (Real Madrid) or Tiago Geralnik (Villarreal), while Luka Romero (Lazio) and Matias Soule (Juventus) only have a handful of first-team games between them.

The Inter duo, plus Geralnik and Soule, are eligible for Italy; Garnacho and Paz were both born in Spain; while Romero is also eligible for Mexico and Spain. The Argentine federation will be hoping to convince the youngsters to commit their international futures to *La Albiceleste*.

QR CORNER

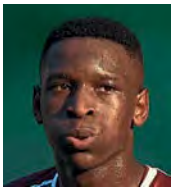
We've teamed up with Footle, a new quiz game that combines football with Wordle. Take a look for yourself here...

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Reyes CLEARY
(West Bromwich Albion)
The 17-year-old forward is drawing admiring glances from Bayern Munich and Arsenal after scoring his 30th goal of the season for West Brom's youth team.

Charlie SETFORD
(Ajax)
The Dutch-born teenage goalkeeper, who switched international allegiance to England in 2019, has been making waves at Ajax and featured on their bench in the Champions League following some impressive displays for Jong Ajax.

Caleb WILEY
(Atlanta United)
The 17-year-old defender, who's been playing for Atlanta's reserve side since the age of 15, scored within 15 minutes of his senior MLS debut, netting the clincher against Sporting Kansas City.



Carney CHUKWUEMEKA
(Aston Villa)
The England Under-19 captain has been linked with a number of elite Premier League clubs after talks over a new contract at Villa Park broke down.

LUIZ HENRIQUE
(Fluminense)
Described in last month's edition of *World Soccer* by Tim Vickery as a "tall, well-built winger" that "poses an attacking threat with his booming left foot", the 21-year-old will join La Liga giants Real Betis this summer.

Maximo CARRIZO
(New York City FC)
Aged just 14, Carrizo has broken records as the youngest player to sign a professional contract in MLS having started training with NYCFC's first team in pre-season.

Liga MX

Mexico reacts to the violent scenes at Queretaro v Atlas, which was abandoned after fighting broke out in the stands

Mexican football usually enjoys being in the limelight. Aztec fans are well known for being amongst the most enthusiastic and active on social media, whether with the export of one of their stars to a European club, the performances of their clubs in international tournaments or the results of the national team in World Cups.

However, on March 5, they were on the planet's lips for all the wrong reasons. On that infamous night, social media networks were not filled with praise or memes, but with images of the worst riots in a Mexican stadium in the last 20 years.

Furthermore, the match in which the incidents occurred was neither a derby nor even between rivals from the same region, but rather a match that, in principle, pitted two unrelated teams against each other, from cities hundreds of kilometres away. Atlas, the current Liga MX champions, away to Queretaro, usual bottom-feeders season after season.

However, there was history between the two. In 2007, Atlas had sealed Queretaro's relegation and their unforgiving ultras had vowed to seek revenge ever since. In the weeks leading up to the match, both clubs' fans groups – or *Barras* – had threatened each other online; the police considered the match to be "high risk".

Despite this, the home team, Queretaro, whose board of directors had only been in charge for a few months, hired a private company that deployed just 290 security staff, which Queretaro state governor Mauricio Kuri later branded "insufficient."

Consequently, when, in the second half of the match with the scores level at 0-0, the local ultras decided to charge in an organised manner from different areas of the stadium against the visiting supporters' area, there was no one to put up any resistance. In fact, videos broadcasted on social media networks a few hours after the incidents showed that some security elements even appeared to open the doors that separated the different areas of the stands, perhaps out of fear, or even, alleged by some local journalists, after having been infiltrated by local fans.

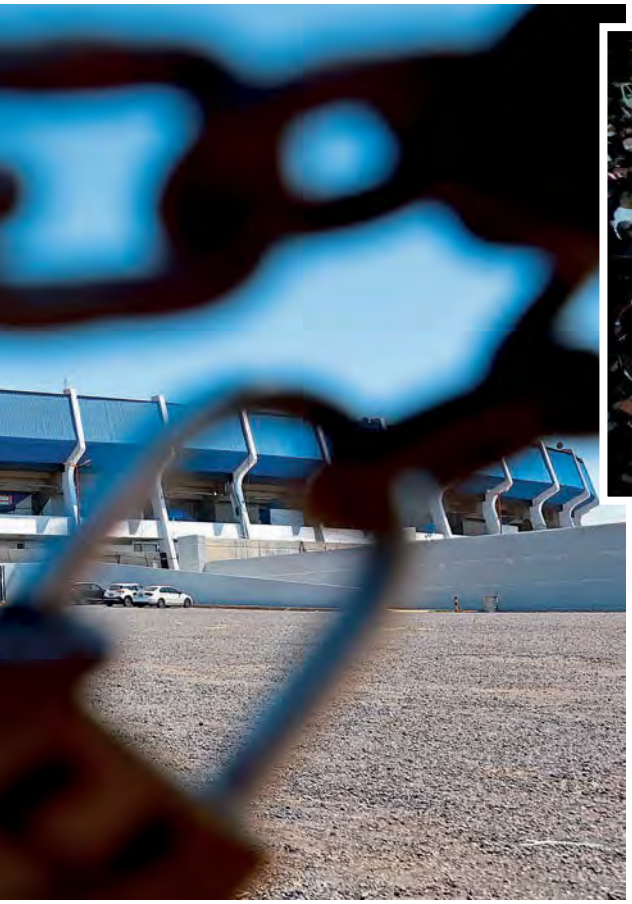
Locked out... Queretaro will play without fans for the next year

From then on, chaos reigned. While groups of ultras fought in the stands, thousands of regular fans sought to escape the violence. Incredibly, the referee initially refused to suspend the game; it was not until terrified spectators began to invade the pitch in search of safety that the ball finally stopped rolling.

> While ultras fought in the stands, thousands of regular fans sought to escape the violence… it was not until terrified spectators began to invade the pitch in search of safety that the ball finally stopped rolling

Players from both teams, realising what was happening, sought to help the defenceless supporters, while in the stands, groups of home ultras were looking for visiting shirts to continue with the attacks. Seeing what was happening, regular home fans lent jackets and sweatshirts to the visiting men, women and children in order to protect them from danger.

After the match, the images published on social media networks were chilling. Naked men, lying unconscious on the ground; entire families running in terror; fans attacked with sticks and stones. Meanwhile, different versions began to report a growing death toll. The first figure was 17, then there was talk of 27, with the number unofficially reported to have



Tributes...Atlas supporters lay tributes to the injured fans outside their stadium

reached up to 50. The news went around the world in minutes.

Fortunately, and despite the terrible scenes shown in the videos, there were no actual deaths during the riots.

Nevertheless, it was a terrible blow to the image of Liga MX both inside and outside the country. Many Mexican supporters expressed their outrage on social media networks and called for drastic measures to ensure that incidents like the one on March 5 would never be repeated.

The measures were announced a few days later by Liga MX president Mikel Arriola: the Queretaro board was sanctioned for five years and given a period of six months to sell the team. The Corregidora stadium was closed for a year, with the team's ultras unable to attend a match for the next three years. For its part, the Atlas *Barra* was suspended for six months.

The punishments were considered insufficient by the press and fans, who called for a system to identify fans and the dissolution of the *Barras* directly. However, a director from another club, not related to the two that played, told *World Soccer* that, given the current situation in Mexican soccer, that would be impossible. "Creating a Fan ID system would cost so much that tickets would become unaffordable for fans, and if *Barras* were to be dissolved, their members would just walk in separately and gather inside."

Despite this, a few days later, Grupo Orlegi, the owners of Atlas, announced that they would unilaterally adopt these measures. The first match with them in place – a local derby against Chivas on March 20 – was, predictably, a disaster.

"There were five security filters. It took us an hour and a half to enter the stadium, and in the end, desperate, the fans forced the doors and did not go through the filters," Javier Levy, a fan who attended the match, told *World Soccer*. "The *Barras* indeed entered separately and gathered in the stands".

Thankfully, at least, there was no further violence.

In practice, despite the scenes and the complaints, disturbances really are rare in Mexican soccer. "We are not Argentina or Italy," said the director. "In Mexico that normally does not happen. In Queretaro-Atlas, they never understood that it was a high-risk game, and there were not enough security elements. There is always danger, of course, but if things are done properly at an organisational level, there are never any problems".

Be that as it may, the image of Mexican soccer was tarnished, and the trust between the supporters and the Mexican FA is at the lowest point in its history. To the point that, after the riots, a group of influencers and fans began a campaign on social media to have Mexico suspended from the 2022 World Cup and prevented from its shared hosting duties in 2026. "If that's what it takes so that everyone is fired and there are substantive changes, so be it," was the general feeling behind it.

It is unlikely to happen, but it shows how far the image of local football in Mexico has fallen, even among its own fans, who are even willing to perform football-harakiri, just for things to change in the country.

Martin del Palacio Langer

Chaos...the fighting spilled over onto the pitch

Poland

Ukraine's neighbours react to the Russian invasion with an empathetic showing of support and solidarity

During the first four weeks of the war, about 2.2 million Ukrainian refugees entered Poland. Appropriate services and many volunteers helping refugees immediately appeared on the Polish-Ukrainian border. They offered food, transport and even their own flats, all for free.

This was an eruption of solidarity from a nation in which the memory of World War II – when as many as six million Poles died – is still strong.

In recent years around a million Ukrainians have come to Poland to work; every Pole has come into contact with a Ukrainian in their everyday life. That is why they are treated as neighbours, who receive help willingly from a nation of people who can empathise with their plight.

Polish footballers also offered their immediate support. In the match against Eintracht Frankfurt, Bayern Munich striker Robert Lewandowski wore, in addition to the captain's armband on one arm, another armband in the blue and yellow colours of Ukraine on the other.

Poland No.1 Wojciech Szczesny of Juventus also made his feelings clear with an emotional statement on Instagram: "My wife was born in Ukraine, there is Ukrainian blood running through the veins of my son. Part of our family is still in Ukraine, a lot of my workers are Ukrainian and they're all great people. Seeing the suffering on their faces and fear for their country makes me realise I can't stand still and pretend that nothing has happened".

Kamil Glik, a national team defender who plays in Italy for Benevento, bought an ambulance to go to Ukraine to pick up sick children.

In the domestic league, Nieciecza defender Filip Modelski helped organise a fundraising campaign among players from the top three leagues. "The idea was born out of the heart, seeing what is happening in the world, to do something for another human being," he said. "We have 54 locker-rooms, and each one has a donation box for Ukraine. Collection is voluntary".

Helping out...players of Niecieza with a donation box for Ukraine

Many clubs also rushed to help. Zaglebie Lubin, for example, organised a donation campaign, issuing appeals for children's items such as nappies, milk, juices, soups, pyjamas and underwear. Piast Gliwice allowed all Ukrainian citizens to enter their league game with Lechia Gdansk for free. Legionovia Legionowo, a fourth-tier club, invited children from Ukraine for free training.

> "It is not an easy decision, but there are more important things in life than football"
>
> Statement from Poland's players after refusing to play against Russia in their World Cup qualifying play-off

The Polish FA (PZPN) also created a database of clubs that were organising free training sessions for Ukrainians to help them find their closest one more easily, while the PZPN also ruled that footballers from Ukraine, regardless of the league they transferred from, would not be included in the limit of players from outside the EU to make it easier for them to play in Poland.

PZPN chief... Cezary Kulesza

The national team were also due to play Russia in Moscow in the World Cup qualifying play-offs in March, yet Cezary Kulesza, the newly-elected chairman of the PZPN insisted: "No more words, time to act!

"Due to the escalation of the aggression of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine, the Polish national team does not intend to play the play-off match against Russia".

His declaration was supported by the players, too: "We, the players of the Polish national team, together with the Polish Football Association, have decided that as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, we do not intend to play in the play-off match.

"It is not an easy decision, but there are more important things in life than football. Our thoughts are with the Ukrainian nation and our friend from the national team, [Dynamo Kyiv defender] Tomasz Kedziora, who is still in Kyiv with his family."

"The decision was unanimous," said Kulesza. "We undertook it knowing that we were supported by footballers, fans and the government administration.

"It would be unimaginable for us to play the team of aggressor and state

that brutally attacked our neighbour, when women and children die.

"[The players] decided that in the face of such a terrible crime it was impossible to play against Russia ...Everyone's thoughts were also with Tomasz Kedziora. We were all afraid for his health".

After a few days, Kedziora and his family were evacuated with the help of the Polish government. He later wrote on Instagram: "We are already safe in Poland. However, our hearts stayed with everyone in Ukraine".

After some hesitation, FIFA eventually excluded Russia, with Poland receiving a bye to the play-off final, where they beat Sweden 2-0.

"I am glad that the Czechs and Swedes supported us," said Kulesza. "It is an important voice of solidarity. War and aggression are not politics. War is war, and we cannot pretend that it is a conflict between two sides".

After the PZPN's statements, Oleksandr Glyvynskyy, the Ukrainian FA media manager, texted his opposite number in Poland, Jakub Kwiatkowski.

"I wrote to him: 'Bravo Cossacks!' This is the biggest compliment in Ukraine. Cossacks were heroes, they always fought for freedom.

"From the very first day, Poles support us humanely and morally," added Glyvynskyy. "We appreciate it, as much as we appreciate what Polish footballers have done".

Dariusz Kurowski

"Ukraine – we are with you"...children's drawings next to the donation point for Ukraine in the Legionowo sports complex

Andriy Yarmolenko

Despite distractions in his home country, the West Ham United ace is finding form

In March, when Ukraine's Andriy Yarmolenko replaced Michail Antonio with West Ham United and Aston Villa still goalless, a supportive roar greeted him.

Going into the match, the Hammers had lost three games in a row, all in different competitions. But 18 minutes after his introduction, the 32-year-old had brought that run to an end.

His precise touch and clinical finish were impressive enough, helping the East Londoners to a 2-1 victory as they aim to keep pace with the Premier League's elite. But the timing of the strike made it extra special, coming just weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Emotional... Yarmolenko sinks to his knees after scoring against Aston Villa

Yarmolenko is undisputedly one of Ukraine's most influential footballers. He's one of only five players to win 100 Ukrainian caps, while 2004 Ballon d'Or winner Andriy Shevchenko is the only man with more international goals.

Born in Saint Petersburg to Ukrainian parents, the winger has been vocal in his condemnation of those who refuse to speak out against Russia's invasion, and was given compassionate leave to be with his family members still in Ukraine.

After the goal against Villa, he dropped to his knees and cried in a moment that hinted at his unimaginable anguish.

"It was so emotional for me, because you know the situation in my country," he told *Sky Sports* after the game. "It's so difficult for me in this moment thinking about football, because every day in my country the Russian army kills Ukrainian people. It was so emotional.

"I just want to say thank you to my team-mates, who support me all the time, every day. West Ham fans support Ukraine and Ukrainian people, and I also want to say thank you to British people because we feel your support."

Four days later, he continued to show his gratitude with arguably the most important goal that the London Stadium has ever seen.

Yarmolenko had entered the game 87 minutes into a gruelling Europa League second-leg tie against Sevilla. Trailing 1-0 from the first leg, West Ham had drawn level through a Tomas Soucek header. Many will have been thinking about penalties as the game entered extra time but, when Bono parried Pablo Fornals' effort, the Ukrainian was first to react and converted a simple finish to inspire unbridled claret and blue celebrations.

While the Aston Villa goal had produced an outcry of emotion, this time he was more restrained. As his team-mates buried him in a group hug and fans exploded in elation, the Ukrainian carried the expression of a man who simply had more important things on his mind.

It seems unfair that Yarmolenko's best moments on the pitch in England have coincided with such depressing scenes away from it. Since he joined West Ham from Borussia Dortmund in 2018, he has had to contend with injuries and has mostly been used as a substitute when fit.

The recent emotionally charged goals have not been his only memorable moments in claret and blue – he hit a brace against Everton in his first Hammers start, notched in two victories against Manchester United, and boosted West Ham's survival hopes towards the end of the 2019-20 campaign with a classy goal against Chelsea – but they have certainly elevated him to a new heroic status in the eyes of West Ham fans.

If he and the club can continue to impress, both domestically and in Europe, his reputation can only continue to improve. He would surely trade it in, however, for peace in his homeland.

Danny Lewis

eyewitness

Oleg Zadernovsky reports

UKRAINE

On the front line

The early morning of February 24 would change Ukraine forever, as Russian fighters launched bombing and missile strikes across many cities, and armoured units crossed the border.

Ukraine, which was part of the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991, has been trying for decades to escape the influence of its aggressive imperial neighbour. The latest attack was a painful recurrence of the country's past.

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany bombed Kyiv in the early morning. On that day, a grand reopening of the refurbished Red Stadium (now the Olimpiyskiy National Sports Complex) was due to take place in the Ukrainian capital city centre, with Dynamo Kyiv involved. Yet instead of a sports festival, civilians were left sheltering from bombs dropped on them by enemy aircrafts.

This time, Russia is the aggressor. Yet weeks on from the invasion, Ukraine continues to resist, despite more than 1,000 bombs and cruise and ballistic missiles causing both military and civilian fatalities. This has been possible primarily due to the incredible heroism and unity of all citizens of a freedom-loving country.

Like most countries, Ukraine has a diaspora spread out across many different parts of the world. Yet, when the war broke out, more than 300,000 of them returned home to protect their parents, partners and children.

Among them was 56-year-old Yuriy Vernydub, the Ukrainian head coach of Sheriff Tiraspol. Just a few months ago, he had amazed the entire football world with an away victory over Real Madrid in the Champions League; now he was taking his heroism to another level.

His life story is nothing short of amazing. "We were in Portugal to play in the Europa League against Braga on February 23. We had pre-match training, and the very next morning, at about 4.30am, my son [Vitaliy Vernydub, a defender for FC Zorya Luhansk] called me and said that Russia had launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine.

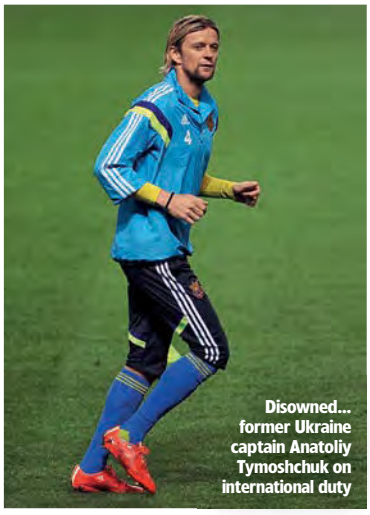
"I was shocked. After the match, I decided to return to Ukraine. It took me three days to get to my native Zaporizhia. On February 26, I was already at home, spent the night, and in the morning I went to the draft board. I made a decision. This is my choice."

Vernydub is currently a member of the artillery brigade of the armed forces of Ukraine, protecting the sky from missiles and Russian aircraft. "What is happening in my country is just a disaster. I have no words."

Meanwhile in London, the legendary Andriy Shevchenko organised the "Play Your Part for Ukraine" campaign. The purpose of the initiative is to raise funds for the children, women and elderly who are fleeing the war. In many cities there is no food, water and medicine. The target is to raise £2 million. ▸

Targeted...children play football in Mariupol, before the South Ukrainian city was devastated by Russian bombs

On the front line...Sheriff Tiraspol's Ukrainian manager Yuriy Vernydub has returned home



Disowned... former Ukraine captain Anatoliy Tymoshchuk on international duty

Unity...West Ham's Andriy Yarmolenko gives his shirt to a fan with a Ukrainian flag

"My relatives tell me about what is happening. It's a horror from which you want to wake up," said Shevchenko of the tragic events in his country. "Kyiv is bombed, children and old people who cannot leave are killed. It seems like a terrible dream. It seems that tomorrow I will wake up and return to normal life, but this will not happen...this is a terrible reality".

Shevchenko, who is very popular in Italy, addressed fans ahead of the Italian Cup match between Milan and Inter with a request to help stop the war.

At the same time, Ukrainian footballers from the top European leagues have created a fund to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with Serhiy Rebrov, Oleksandr Zinchenko, Vitaliy Mykolenko, Andriy Yarmolenko, Ruslan Malinovskyi, Viktor Kovalenko and Roman Yaremchuk among the players to have initiated it.

Yarmolenko, who was born in Saint Petersburg (or Leningrad, as it was known in 1989 when he was born), personally helped the residents of his hometown Chernihiv, which was subjected to numerous bombings. In particular, the stadium of the Ukrainian Premier League club Desna Chernihiv was completely destroyed – ironic, given that the ground was once named after Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man in outer space, when it was renovated in 1961. Now it was the target of Russians bombs being dropped from the sky.

"Russian invaders are dropping unguided bombs on the peaceful quarters of the city where I grew up. How is this possible in the 21st century?" asked the West Ham United forward.

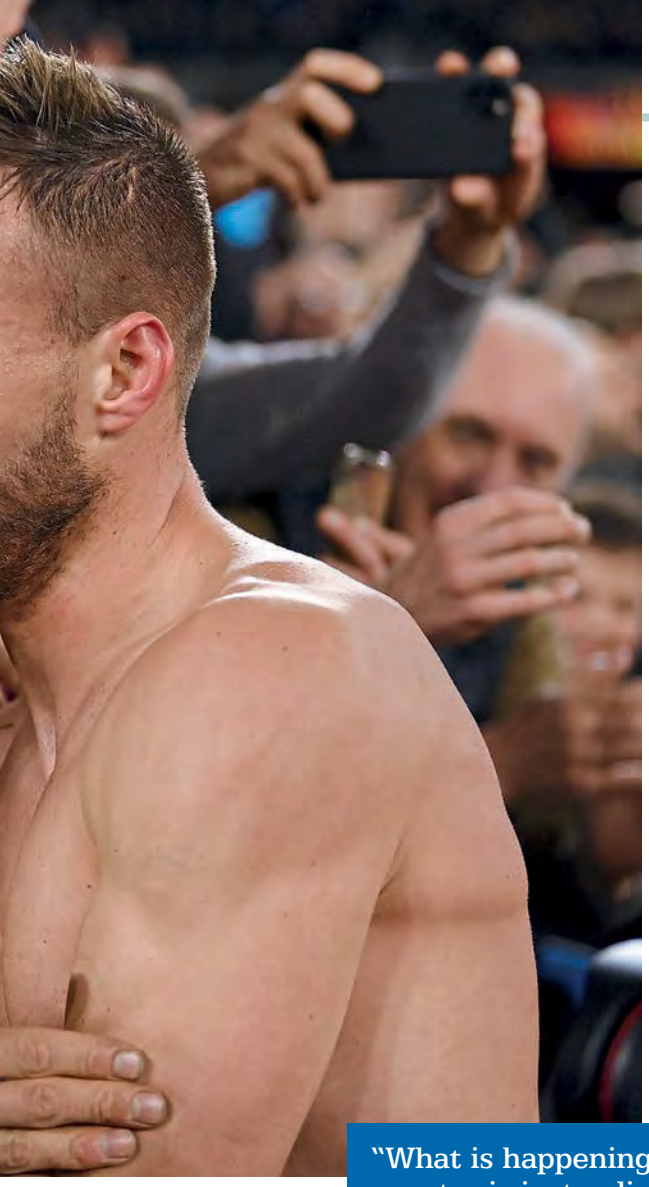
"I am very grateful to Andriy Yarmolenko for the help he gave to his city," said Vyacheslav Chaus, head of the Chernihiv Regional Military Administration. "These are special devices for our military scouts. This is what they really need right now. Andriy, thank you."

Ukraine has three fully professional national leagues: the Premier League, First League and Second League, with 63 clubs across the divisions. In the top flight alone there are more than 50 foreign-born players whose lives have been plunged into uncertainty. A recent report in *The Guardian* recounted the story of many of them, forced to flee their homes in the middle of the night.

The Bureau of the FIFA Council has allowed players based in Ukraine to register with other clubs, regardless of transfer windows being open. Dozens of foreign-born players have already completed moves abroad, mostly on loan. Junior Moraes, for example, a naturalised Ukrainian with 11 international caps, has returned to his native Brazil to join Corinthians, having scored over 100 Premier League goals for the likes of Metalurh Donetsk, Dynamo Kyiv and Shakhtar Donetsk since arriving in 2012.

In spite of all this, there are those who are pretending that nothing terrible is happening in Ukraine. Among them is Anatoliy Tymoshchuk, Ukraine's most-capped player with 144 appearances, who is continuing to work as assistant coach for Zenit St. Petersburg.

The Ukrainian Football Association (UAF) have already stripped the former midfielder of all regalia. He was excluded from the register of national team



Well supported...Manchester City supporters raise a flag for left-back Oleksandr Zinchenko

players, with his coaching diploma and all other awards received in Ukraine also rescinded.

"Since the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, Tymoshchuk, the former captain of the Ukrainian national team, not only did not make any public statements in this regard, but also did not stop his cooperation with the club of the aggressor," read a UAF statement. "At a time when [his former club] FC Bayern Munich publishes statements and holds actions in support of Ukraine, Anatoliy continues to remain silent and work for the club of the aggressor. By making this conscious choice, Anatoliy Tymoshchuk damages the image of Ukrainian football."

The strength of feeling was summed up by Tymoshchuk's former team-mate Rebrov, who now heads the Al Ain club in the United Arab Emirates: "During a war, one cannot take a neutral position. 'I'll sit for a couple of weeks, wait for which side will have an advantage, and then I will express my opinion.' No. This will not happen, and I hope that our country will be cleansed of such people.

"My parents, my friends are sitting at home and do not know when a shell or an air bomb will fly into them. Russians say sport is out of politics? They invaded Ukraine to launch rockets on our soil. Do they get paid, pay taxes that go to arms against us and want to compete with Ukraine in the same football tournaments? No, it shouldn't be, and I'm sure it won't be!"

> "What is happening in my country is just a disaster"
> **Sheriff Tiraspol manager Yuriy Vernydub**

The headquarters of the UAF itself have also switched to a military mode of operation. "When the war began, we provided our Football House for the needs of humanitarian issues, medicine and a military hospital," said the federation's president Andriy Pavelko. "We are doing everything to help our military, our Kyiv hospitals, in order to be as effective as possible for the victory of our country in such a difficult time."

The UAF Coordination Centre has also already evacuated more than 1,000 children from schools in Ukraine to Italy.

If you would like to make a donation to Andriy Shevchenko's Play Your Part campaign, go to: www.justgiving.com/campaign/play-your-part

"I want to thank our army from the bottom of my heart. Soldiers and officers are now admired by all of Ukraine, especially our children, for whom every military man is a guardian angel," added Ukrainian football legend Igor Belanov.

Oleh Blokhin, a former Ballon d'Or winner, said: "I am calling on the command of Russia and Belarus to immediately stop the shelling of Ukrainian cities. You are fighting not only with the soldiers of Ukraine, but also with the civilian population. It is a crime! Cities and villages were destroyed in Ukraine. I am a native of Kyiv. My city has not seen such aggression since World War II. Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Kherson, Mykolayiv and many other cities and villages were destroyed."

In England there has been visible support for Ukraine inside stadiums, particularly during games featuring Ukrainian players, such as Manchester City defender Oleksandr Zinchenko, who was handed the captain's armband for the FA Cup clash with Peterborough United at the start of March. "Russia has crossed all borders. This country is indeed an aggressor that is killing civilians and no one in the world can accept this. We will never give up. We will fight for our freedom," said the 25-year-old. "Previously, the younger generation mostly had football stars as their idols. But now I can say with full confidence that the idols of young people, including me, are the soldiers of the Ukrainian army. They are the real heroes!"

His words reflect the aspirations of millions of Ukrainians who are ready to give everything for the sake of a happy future for their country.

eyewitness

Tim Vickery reports

BRAZIL

State of play

Continental champions Palmeiras are now also the new champions of the state of Sao Paulo. In Rio de Janeiro, Fluminense shocked Flamengo to come out on top. National league and cup winners Atletico Mineiro were predictable winners in Minas Gerais, while in Rio Grande do Sul it was celebration time for Gremio, offering some consolation for their surprise relegation to the national second division.

But does it really matter? The serious stuff starts from April – the Brazilian Championship, Copa Libertadores and the later rounds of the domestic cup. Any euphoria at becoming state champions is likely to wear off pretty quickly.

These competitions – one for each of the country's 27 states – exist in a kind of historical limbo. With no real connection to the national league, they are a perpetual source of confusion for the outsider, and a vexing issue for many inside the Brazilian game.

They are the consequence of the problems of organising football in a land the size of a continent – where geography does not help. There is no coastal plain to ease links between cities. Forests and ranges of cliffs have hampered transport connections, and this is reflected in its football.

The tradition of the Brazilian game is regional rather than national. Competitions were local in nature out of necessity. The state championships were up and running long before anything more ambitious was possible. The historic rivalries, then, have been within cities rather than between them. Limitations of infrastructure mean that a genuinely national championship did not get underway until 1971, and it has always had to split the year with the state competitions, which until comparatively recently were still seen by many as at least as important.

But there has always been a problem with them. On some kind of league basis – and all sorts of convoluted formats have been used – they pit giant clubs against tiny opponents. In a one-off cup competition, this might have a charm. But stretched out over the course of a few months, it all becomes something of a strain. The closing stages are intense and dramatic – high-octane finals disputed by old rivals. Reaching that point, though, has tried the patience. The state championships are something like a wedding ring swallowed by a horse – you can get it back the other side, but not before wading through a considerable quantity of undesirable material.

So why have they lasted all this time? The calendar of domestic Brazilian football has long been controversial. It is a perennial quest to cram three litres into a bottle that was built for two. One reason is that the hyperinflation of the 1980s and early '90s was so insane that it left little scope or incentive for the planning of something more rational. Once inflation was brought under control in 1994, it was apparent that devoting half the year to the state championships was an exaggeration. Pressure mounted, and in 2003 the time given to the national league was increased, and that of the regional competitions reduced. They now run from mid-to-late-January until April or the start of May, with this year's World Cup forcing an especially early finish. ▸

Campeonato Carioca...Fluminense forward German Cano lifts the Rio Championship trophy

The current arrangement is a compromise solution that suits nearly nobody. It cuts back on time for the big clubs to have a proper pre-season, and clutters their calendar with meaningless matches. But is also little use to the small clubs, many of whom have little or no other professional activity. If their season lasts just three months, how can they be expected to keep a team together, build a fan base and compete with the giants on better terms?

But it is a good deal for the state federations – and here the waters are muddied by politics. For the state federations, these local competitions are a necessity. They form the overwhelming source of the federations' income. And the balance of power within the CBF (Brazil's FA) lies not with the big clubs, but with the state federations. These tropical turkeys are not going to vote for Christmas. They have power over the calendar, and will therefore always make sure that there is a way to fit in their own competitions.

This leaves dangling a fascinating question: why have Brazil's big clubs accepted with such passivity a calendar that works against their best interests? Some have tried to dismiss the state championships as pre-season, but the comparison does not really stand up. There is intense pressure from fans and media for results. In February Corinthians, Santos, Botafogo, Gremio and Juventude all sacked their coaches, mostly as a result of protests from the supporters – something which would not happen in a genuine pre-season.

And if poor results in the state championship can be fatal, winning the competition can also come at a cost. Last year there was great pressure on Sao Paulo to end a long run without a trophy. Coach Hernan Crespo's side went all out to win the state championship.

They achieved their objective, but took so much out of themselves that they went on to perform poorly in the national league, and Crespo soon lost his job. Brazil's fixture list is so complicated that clubs are forced to prioritise, and nowadays the big clubs almost always have their sights set on something higher than local supremacy.

There is one possible scenario in which more clubs choose to give priority to winning the state championships. That is because gaps are opening up. Brazil likes to see its national first division as the best balanced, most competitive league in the world, where a dozen giants go into the competition with a realistic chance of glory. But that no longer applies. Three giants have now broken away from the pack, with Palmeiras, Atletico Mineiro and Flamengo now monopolising the serious silverware. If other clubs come to the conclusion that the state championship is their best or only shot at a trophy, then it is even possible that these competitions could recover some of their lost importance.

More silverware... Gustavo Gomez, captain of Copa Libertadores winners Palmeiras, lifts the Campeonato Paulista

But the more powerful trends would appear to be pulling in the other direction. One club, the go-ahead, Athletico Paranaense, decided some years ago that the state competitions were, in the expression of the club president, "a con." They use most of the Parana state championship to prepare an Under-23 side.

More clubs will surely follow – especially now that some are taking advantage of new legislation to turn themselves into businesses with owners. Cruzeiro are now in the hands of the great former striker Ronaldo, who made his name with the club almost 30 years ago. He has made it clear that Cruzeiro are unlikely to field a full-strength side in future versions of the Minas Gerais Championship.

> The state championships are something like a wedding ring swallowed by a horse – you can get it back the other side, but not before wading through a considerable quantity of undesirable material

Foreign owners are likely to have even less affinity with the traditions of the Brazilian game, and more of an incentive to come up with a rational calendar that maximises commercial opportunities – i.e. one in which the national league is not hampered by having to share the season with a loss maker. For years there has been a dream of Brazil's clubs organising their own league.

It has always foundered on the lack of unity among club directors. When the president is an elected figure, there are often gains to be had from feuding with local rivals. In a more business-conscious environment, where profit is king, the clubs will surely be more inclined to see each other as partners, and a new league would presumably make no concessions to the state federations.

One of Brazilian football's most colourful figures was Joao Saldanha, a high-profile journalist who dabbled as a coach. As well as qualifying Brazil for the 1970 World Cup, Saldanha wrote vehement columns on the game. Back in 1988 he concluded: "Our path is very clear...A first division played throughout

the year is the only salvation. This current division [between state and national championships] is purely political and exists to defend small-minded interests. And the worst thing is that those who run football are aware of this. But they are also aware that there would be no place for them in serious football."

Saldanha's dream is closer than ever to turning into reality. Serious discussions are taking place about setting up a league. The path to progress, though, will not be smooth. The state of Sao Paulo offers an obvious problem. It is the wealthiest state, where clubs outside the capital are rich enough to assemble teams of quality. The Sao Paulo championship, then, is the only state competition with sufficient depth to be worthwhile. This gives Sao Paulo a competitive advantage over other states that it would seek to preserve. It would be very reluctant to give up its local competition.

So on this issue, the state that in theory should be in Brazil's vanguard is in practice more likely to be the most conservative. It is a bizarre paradox. But as Bossa Nova musician Tom Jobim was so fond of saying: Brazil is not for beginners.

Dominant...Atletico Mineiro added the Minas Gerais title to their 2021 national league crown

Cruzeiro owner... Ronaldo

eyewitness

Paddy Agnew reports

ITALY

Il disastro di Palermo

For those that follow Italian football, Italy's elimination from the Qatar World Cup – beaten 1-0 in March in a play-off by "minnows" North Macedonia – was just about the most inexplicable and unexpected result of modern, Italian times. *La Repubblica*'s senior football writer, Enrico Curro, probably got it right when he described the disaster as "certainly the worst in 112 years of Italian national team history".

What happened? Institutional incompetence, penalties missed along the qualifying way, and tired and injured players all led to a woeful attack of the collective jitters from the same squad which only eight months earlier had played bold, brave and sparkling football on the road to winning the 2020 European Championship.

On paper, this was a complete mismatch: the FIFA-ranked No.6 side playing at home to a side ranked 67th. Italy are the reigning European champions and four-time World Cup winners – only Brazil and Germany

have won the competition more times. In contrast, North Macedonia have never qualified for a World Cup, and at their first major tournament – last summer's Euro 2020 finals – they were eliminated from their group with zero points.

Another of the new national sides to emerge from the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early '90s, the North Macedonia team that played against Italy in Palermo comprised players who earn their weekly crust in places such as Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia and Spain, but none in the country they were representing.

So, how did this motley crew of migrant Macedonians end up beating the mighty Italy, away from home in a full house Favorita stadium in Palermo? What is more, the Macedonians were without arguably two of their most influential players of recent seasons – Parma veteran Goran Pandev (now retired from international football) and Napoli star Eljif Elmas (suspended).

Football commentators, Italian federation boffins and *Azzurri* fans will all now have plenty of time to think over that question. If and when Italy go on to qualify for the 2026 World Cup, their return will mark a 12-year absence from world football's premier national team competition.

In many ways, Italy's elimination represents a classic perfect storm of negative incidents in which the good fortune that stood by them last summer (remember Austria's disallowed goal in their second round 2-1 defeat to Italy?) deserted them. In the lead-up to this disaster, clearly, the most obvious ill fortune concerned midfielder Jorginho, whose missed penalties in both of the two qualifying group clashes with their major group rivals Switzerland proved disastrous. The second of those, in November, came in they dying moments of the game. Had it been converted, qualification would have already been assured.

Those two draws left Italy needing a win against Northern Ireland in Belfast in their final group game, hoping that in the meantime Switzerland might trip up at home to Bulgaria. However, it was the Italians who tripped up, deservedly held to a goalless draw by a gritty Northern Ireland while the Swiss romped all the way to Qatar with a 4-0 thrashing of Bulgaria.

Huge upset...North Macedonia celebrate their shock victory as dejected Italy players bow their heads

And then to Palermo. Four qualifying draws clearly took the shine off Italian morale, adding to the pressure going into the play-offs. Thus, when things failed to happen against North Macedonia, when Italy failed to take their many chances against a comprehensively outplayed side, the nerves got jittery, the sense of conviction diminished and players like Lorenzo Insigne, Ciro Immobile and Domenico Berardi began to look incapable of hitting a barn door.

Emblematic was the 29th-minute miss from Berardi. After incessant Italian pressing, North Macedonia goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski mishit a clearance straight to the Sassuolo man, and it looked like the end for the visitors. Berardi was totally unmarked, inside the area and facing a totally empty goalmouth.

For a player of his quality, a goal should have been a mere formality. Yet somehow, he miscued his shot and saw it slowly trickle through to the arms of Dimitrievski who had been given the time to recover his position.

There were other ingredients in this perfect storm. Italy were without arguably their best forward (Federico Chiesa) and their best defender (Leonardo Bonucci) who were both injured. Roberto Mancini also chose to rest his other defensive pillar, Giorgio Chiellini, over-confidently saving him for the assumed play-off final against Portugal five days later.

In the end, in desperation, Mancini sent on Chiellini at the end of normal time, expecting him to see Italy through extra-time and maybe even the penalty shootout. That proved irrelevant as Aleksandar Trajkovski – a forward who, ironically, played four seasons for Palermo – popped up with a 92nd-minute winning goal.

Here, too, the perfect storm continued. Not only was this just North Macedonia's third shot of the night in a game where Italy logged over 30 shots on the Macedonian goal, but Italian goalkeeper, Gianluigi Donnarumma, unemployed for most of the game, seemed to be taken by surprise by Trajkovski's well-struck but hardly irresistible strike.

Comparisons with Italy's 2017 play-off elimination at the hands of Sweden make this particular disaster all the harder to understand.

The 2017 side, then coached by Gian Piero Ventura, had struggled in its qualifying group, being comprehensively outplayed by its major rival, Spain, in a 3-0 away defeat in the crucial qualifier. This time, Italy should and could have won their group if they had scored just

Costly...Jorginho reflects on his penalty misses

Staying put... Italy manager Roberto Mancini

one of their two penalties in either game against eventual group winners, Switzerland. Indeed, having remained unbeaten through the group phase, this shock result was only their second defeat since a 1-0 loss in Portugal in September 2018.

Facing a monumental disaster like this, an old Italian temptation might have been to sack the coach. Fortunately, thus far at least, the Italian federation has resisted that temptation. Mancini, after serious reflection, also rejected the notion of resignation.

When he met with the media four days after the game, Mancini inevitably expressed his huge disappointment, repeating an oft-expressed concept, namely that Italy should have won the qualifying group a long time earlier: "We should have won the group by at least two points from Switzerland. In Basel we deserved to win 3-0, but after that everything went wrong.

"It's no use recriminating on what might have happened, we've just got to improve now."

As he sets about building a new Italy, Mancini could well repeat the process he initiated in 2018, in the wake of the Ventura disaster. He has already indicated that he will make room for younger players, as he did then. Which would mean that players like Immobile, Insigne and Andrea Belotti in attack, Jorginho and Nicolo Barella in midfield, and Chiellini and Francesco Acerbi in defence will struggle to hold on to their places.

While Mancini understandably defended both his players and their track record (a European Championship victory and a three-year long, 37-match unbeaten run), there were still many commentators and pundits who argued that you cannot simply put it all down to bad luck.

> "Italian football suffers from cultural backwardness; there are no new ideas around. Other countries have evolved but we remain where we were 60 years ago"
>
> Former Milan and Italy coach Arrigo Sacchi

Arrigo Sacchi, former Milan and Italy coach, told *Gazzetta dello Sport*: "Italian football suffers from cultural backwardness; there are no new ideas around. Other countries have evolved but we remain where we were 60 years ago. Let me say it clearly, the least responsible for this situation are the players and coaches. Here the problem is institutional.

"Italy's win at Euro 2020 last summer was a marvellous exception for which we should all be grateful...but it was the exception [to] the rule.

"Other countries are moving ahead fast, building federation centres, supporting the development and growth of young players...not us. Why?"

Sacchi also feels that the pace, intensity and physicality of the Italian league sometimes looks "ridiculous" by comparison with that of the top European leagues, those of England, Spain and Germany.

What is sure is that for the second time in the last 40 years, Italian football has missed an amazing opportunity (not to mention the estimated €15 million that the elimination will cost the federation).

In the 1980s and '90s, Italy failed to cash in big time on its dominant role in world club football. The country that was then the "Hollywood" of football, attracting Maradona, Platini, Zico, et al, simply failed to make the most of a ten to 15 year moment. Italian football missed out on the obvious infrastructural investments, including club-owned stadiums, youth-team academies and effective worldwide marketing, so effectively implemented by the Premier League.

Now, the opportunity that risks being blown away is that created by Mancini, whose Euro 2020 victory provided not only a footballing product of refreshing excellence but also a badly needed change of Italian mentality on which to build for the future. As of now, that future looks much more complicated – but at least Mancini gets another shot at it.

Fall from grace...Italy celebrate after last year's Euro 2020 final victory at Wembley Stadium

eyewitness

Lukas Vrablik reports

AUSTRIA

Red Bull giving young players wings

Red Bull Salzburg have finally experienced their Champions League dream. After long years of unsuccessfully trying to get into the group stage of Europe's most prestigious club competition, there was talk of a "curse".

While Salzburg dominated the Austrian Bundesliga – winning 12 of the last 15 league titles – it took until 2019 for the team to get into the groups. When it comes to the club's philosophy, though, there was always a belief that Salzburg were doing something right.

The proof came in 2021-22, when they advanced to the last 16 of the Champions League, bringing a clash against Bayern Munich, a superclub just across the German border. After earning a 1-1 draw in Austria, Salzburg hoped for a big surprise, but lost the return leg 7-1.

But one heavy defeat doesn't undermine the progress that the club has made over the last decade.

Austrian energy drinks giant Red Bull bought the club in 2005, radically changing the face of football in the country. After establishing themselves as the dominant local power, Salzburg hatched an even more ambitious plan: to break through with a unique strategy.

Salzburg developed one of the most successful transfer policies in world football, one that would serve as an inspiration to others – particularly clubs outside the top five European leagues. Alongside the likes of Porto and Ajax, Salzburg earned a reputation as a talent factory.

Some sections of Austrian football supporters don't accept the club for its financial backing by Red Bull or relationship with RB Leipzig. Yet Salzburg have undoubtedly found a clear philosophy both on and off the pitch. They serve as a springboard for talents from around the world to the top leagues, and, at the same time, the winning doesn't stop.

The list of players to emerge at Salzburg before moving on to bigger leagues is extensive. Borussia Dortmund striker Erling Haaland and Liverpool ace Sadio Mane are the most obvious, high-profile examples. Yet they are far from unique: Mane's Anfield team-mates Naby Keita and Takumi Minamino made their names in Salzburg, as did Patson Daka (Leicester City), Enock Mwepu (Brighton), Dayot Upamecano and Marcel Sabitzer (both Bayern), Duje Caleta-Car (Marseille), Mu'nas Dabbur (Hoffenheim) and Dominik Szoboszlai (Leipzig). Over the past decade, the strategy has been clear: find talents and give them a chance.

At the start of the Red Bull era, the approach was quite different. Salzburg relied on experienced players and coaches, such as Giovanni Trapattoni. That changed in 2012, when revolutionary German coach Ralf Rangnick became sporting director of both Salzburg and Leipzig. Thanks to the recruitment of young players, their development, and an attacking tactical system, both clubs broke through into European football.

In 2016, Christoph Freund became Salzburg's new sporting director, having worked across the club's structure for the previous ten years. "We began to change the club's philosophy in 2012. FC Red Bull Salzburg were successful in Austria before then, but relied more on experienced players," he tells *World Soccer*. "We are now the youngest team in the Champions League group stage with an average age of around 22. At the start, a lot of people didn't understand our new strategy and what we were doing, or were dissatisfied. There was a lot we had to do at many levels inside and outside of the club to convince people of our work. We now attract great respect for what we do.

"We know though that it can't always get better and better, and we will have years when we will struggle a bit. But we are 100 per cent convinced and will not move from our way and our clear philosophy of doing things."

Salzburg has a connection to football schools on all continents and a broad scouting network. After identifying young talents, they have sufficient finances and the infrastructure to bring them in. As countless examples show, Salzburg know how it's necessary to prepare these talents for the biggest games.

The list of players to emerge at Salzburg before moving on to bigger leagues is extensive. Borussia Dortmund's Erling Haaland and Liverpool's Sadio Mane are the most obvious, high-profile examples

Champions League... Salzburg line up ahead of their clash with Bayern Munich
redbullsalzburg.at

"We attach great importance to the training of young players. Our scouting and club philosophy are also geared towards this," adds Freund. "We have a very clear image of young talent that fits the kind of football we want to see here. And when they are with us, they receive not only the best possible training, but they also should be able to play as many minutes as possible in the professional field very early on. First with our cooperation club FC Liefering, then with Red Bull Salzburg."

Liefering are one of the best clubs in the Austrian second tier – lying in third at the time of writing – and have a close partnership with Salzburg. In 2021, Salzburg sent more than 20 players out on loan, with many of them heading to Liefering. Hungarian playmaker Szoboszlai was the most prominent success story from this route; he spent the 2017-18 campaign with Liefering before making his impact on the Salzburg first team, later joining Leipzig for €20 million in 2021.

Talent factory...Erling Haaland made his name with Red Bull Salzburg

It is this early exposure to senior football, and willingness to give young players opportunities, that makes Salzburg such an attractive destination. It was certainly decisive in attracting Norwegian striker Haaland, who joined from Molde in 2019, despite offers from much bigger clubs.

"It helps that so many great players have been with us in recent years," says

Freund. "That makes us very interesting for talents who otherwise would probably never have chosen to come to Austria. It makes us attractive to talent. They then play in a rather small league and, in recent years, always at Champions League level. It's not just about winning titles in Austria, but also playing a lot of games in the Europa League or Champions League. In this way, the players can develop in the best possible way."

In Austria, this influx of foreign youngsters has been unprecedented. *Der Standard* journalist Andreas Hagenauer explains: "Breakthroughs of Haaland and Mane are top of that list. Sure, it was a surprise that they skyrocketed like they did. As followers of a small Austrian league, we were not used to things like that. Keita was one of the best players who ever played in our league; Szoboszlai was also one of the most gifted. We'll see about Daka as well."

If Salzburg sell a player, they are usually ready to replace him quickly. Rather than panic buying, they simply select one of the players loaned out to Liefering, or delve into their Under-19 team, which won the UEFA Youth League in 2017 with a team featuring Daka, plus Leipzig superstar Amadou Haidara, Fiorentina defender Igor and Austrian midfielder Hannes Wolf.

There's a clear idea about the

Top talent...young German forward Karim Adeyemi *redbullsalzburg.at*

Celebrations...the players and supporters celebrate their draw with Bayern *redbullsalzburg.at*

typology of the players, too. Salzburg like to play an attacking, high-pressing and dynamic game, with a basis on the power of collective and creating an environment where excellent individuals can thrive.

"There's definitely not just one player in the last few years who has delivered extremely good performances very quickly with us," Freund explains. "We are particularly proud of the development of many of our boys from the Red Bull academy such as Xaver Schlager, Konrad Laimer, Stefan Lainer and many more, up to our current blue chips from our academy such as Nicolas Seiwald, Luka Sucic and Karim Adeyemi."

The flow of young talents just doesn't seem to stop. Hagenauer points out several players in the current team who have enormous potential: "There's certainly Adeyemi, who's going to make it, absolutely no doubt. Then there are Mohamed Camara, Seiwald, Oumar Solet, Rasmus Kristensen and Brenden Aaronson, all with a good chance to find their spot in the big leagues."

It's not only about players, though. Red Bull clubs have also been able to find young and promising coaches. Roger Schmidt, Marco Rose and Adi Hutter all had their breakthroughs at Salzburg, as did Jesse Marsch, who worked for New York Red Bulls and Leipzig before making his name in Austria. After Marsch left to take over at Leipzig in 2021, he was replaced by 33-year-old Matthias Jaissle, who previously coached Liefering. Jaissle played as a centre-back for Hoffenheim (coached by Rangnick), but retired after a serious injury. He went on to coach the youth team at Leipzig, and progressed to Salzburg's senior team, taking them to the Champions League last 16. In a recent interview with *The Athletic*, he insisted he wasn't "Julian Nagelsmann 2.0".

> "Red Bull Salzburg certainly helped to put Austria back on the map of European football"
>
> **Austrian journalist Andreas Hagenauer**

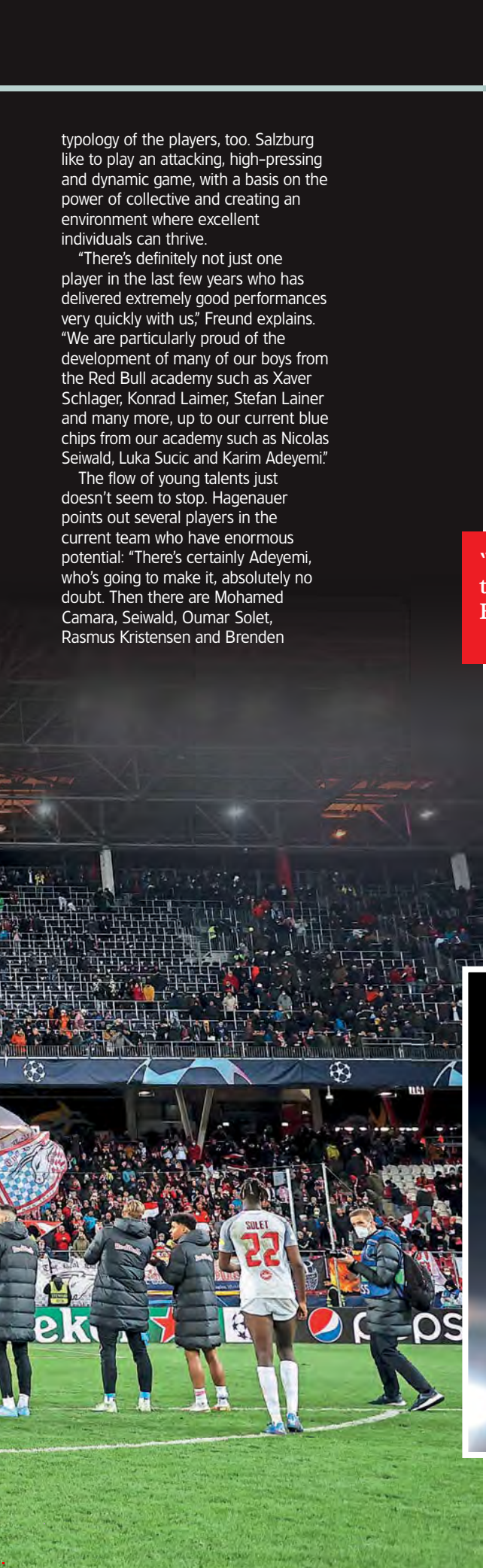
Despite being a club from a smaller league, Salzburg can hold their own in the European competitions and are possibly showing the way for other clubs. "I think it's difficult to compare clubs or leagues. There are so many different approaches and requirements, especially for the really big clubs," says Freund. "But what I can say is that we are doing very well with this concept here at Salzburg and we are all very happy about it.

"If there are clubs that learn something from us and that pay attention to our path, that's a nice thing. But as I said, every club has to find its own orientation and strategy. We are 100 per cent convinced of the path we have chosen and it suits our club."

After Red Bull's takeover of the club, Salzburg received a lot of criticism within Austria, just as Leipzig did in Germany when they were added to the company's portfolio of clubs a few years later.

The new owners indelibly left their mark on the club, changing the name of the stadium, the badge and the shirt colour. While Salzburg regularly play in the Champions League or Europa League and attract young fans, their domestic rivals have a near-impossible job to keep up with them, with the result an entirely predictable Austrian Bundesliga.

"[Salzburg] certainly helped to put Austria back on the map of European football. Maybe all the European leagues have problems with a big gap between the leaders and contenders, but in Austria the domination of Salzburg is really obvious," admits Hagenauer. "Salzburg's rise helped Austrian football, but at the same time it has damaged it."



Red Bull Salzburg coach...Matthias Jaissle *redbullsalzburg.at*

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

Talentscout

RED BULL STARLETS

Words Nick Bidwell

Benjamin SESKO

Red Bull Salzburg

In a sentence
Although the 18-year-old Slovenian striker has been hampered by a recurring thigh problem this season, he has been compared to former Red Bull Salzburg superstar striker Erling Haaland.

What they say
"He has all the ingredients to develop into an international class striker in the coming years. He has made huge progress in recent times"
Salzburg sporting director Christoph Freund

"For someone of his age, Benjamin Sesko is already bringing a lot to the table. He has proven his worth for both [Salzburg] and the Slovenian national team. He's a complete player, but is still young of course and needs time to get himself ready for the next steps in his career"
Salzburg coach Matthias Jaissle

The story so far
Born in the eastern Slovenian town of Radece in May 2003, Sesko grew up with Zlatan Ibrahimovic as his hero. After shining in the junior ranks of NK Radece, Rudar Trbovlje and NK Krsko, scoring 59 goals in 23 starts for the latter's Under-15s in the 2017-18 season, he was headhunted by leading Slovenian club Domzale.

After another 21 youth team goals in the 2018-19 campaign, word began to filter out of Slovenia of his prowess. Yet despite reported interest from Bundesliga giants Bayern Munich and Dortmund, the then-16-year-old opted for the safer option of a contract with perennial Austrian champions Red Bull Salzburg in July 2019, joining in a €2.5 million deal.

The goals continued to flow on loan at Salzburg's second-division feeder club Liefering. After a relatively quiet first campaign, he contributed 21 goals and six assists as Liefering came second in last season's league.

> "He's a complete player"
> Salzburg coach Matthias Jaissle

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT SESKO

- Sesko's mother is Bosnian, yet he turned down the Bosnian federation when they attempted to persuade him to represent them.
- He is both Slovenia's youngest ever debutant and goalscorer.
- He ended last season in unstoppable form for Liefering, scoring 18 goals in the final 14 games of the season.

He returned to Salzburg last summer – where his former Liefering manager Matthias Jaissle had been appointed head coach – and was thrown in straight away, scoring three league goals before mid-September.

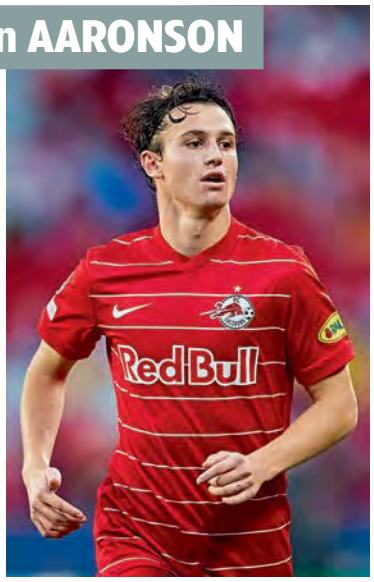
After earning international honours at various levels (Under-15, Under-16, Under-17 and Under-19), he won his first full Slovenia cap in a friendly against North Macedonia in June 2021 – at just 18 years and one day old – and scored his first goal four months later.

The next step
With Salzburg's current top scorer Karim Adeyemi certain to move on in the summer, a vacancy for an exciting talent at the top of the team is about to open up, and Sesko is a ready-made replacement. The club hope to keep him on board for the next couple of years, having tied him to a new contract until June 2026, and expect him to flourish further as an automatic starter. Some of Europe's biggest clubs may have other ideas, though. According to German daily *Bild*, the likes of Bayern Munich, Liverpool and Manchester City are all monitoring him very closely.

Strengths
The Erling Haaland comparisons are drawn from his height, physical power, presence, dynamism and straight for goal instincts. Extremely mobile, he is deceptively quick over the ground, has great ball control and can dribble well too. A clinical finisher.

Weaknesses
Needs to be slightly more collective in his mind-set, as he occasionally tries to do too much on his own.

Brenden AARONSON



Red Bull Salzburg
High energy, intense competitiveness and flexibility come as standard in the young American midfielder. Formerly with Philadelphia Union in MLS, the 21-year-old is happy in virtually any role in the middle of the park: as a number ten, in box-to-box mode or in wide areas. He can also mix it physically with the most obdurate of opponents.

ARTUR

RB Bragantino
Tremendously gifted right-winger who deservedly received a Brazil call-up last autumn, although he is still waiting for his first cap. Elusive and agile, he is brilliant in one-on-ones. Accumulated dream numbers for Bragantino in 2021, and was a key figure in his club's march to the 2021 Copa Sudamericana final. Is expected to join RB Leipzig next season.

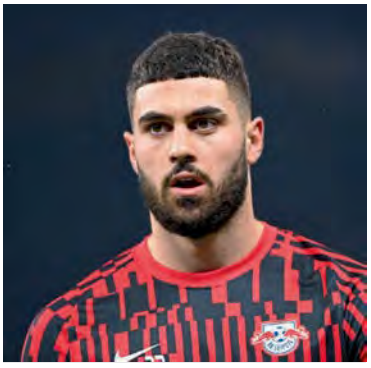
Brian BROBBEY

Ajax (on loan from RB Leipzig)
The Ajax academy graduate, now in his second spell in Amsterdam, has an awful lot going for him, not least his explosive speed, fierce shot, clever movement, sound hold-up play and ability to play anywhere in the attacking-third. Having said that, he is very much a confidence player.

Caden Clark

New York Red Bulls (on loan from RB Leipzig)
The exciting 18-year-old prospect has a special knack for making things happen. Excellent in the timing of his runs into the box, he is never short of a spectacular finish: with volleys and long-distance strikes a speciality. The attacker enjoyed an exceptional rookie season with NYRB in 2021, and signed a three-year deal with RB Leipzig in June of that year.

Josko Gvardiol

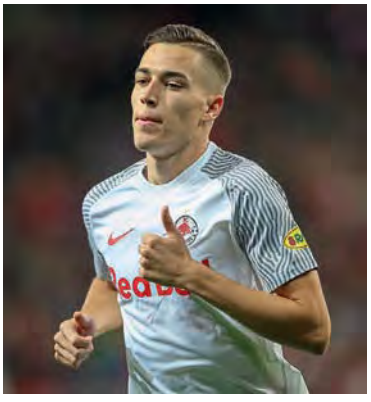


RB Leipzig
Leipzig pulled off a coup last summer when paying Dinamo Zagreb €19m for the Croat international centre-back. In the current Bundesliga, there are few better central defenders than the 20-year-old left-footer. Equally comfortable as a left-back, where he played for Croatia at Euro 2020. RB reportedly rejected a €60m offer for him in January from a mystery buyer.

Mohamed Simakan

RB Leipzig
Picked up from Ligue 1 outfit Strasbourg in the 2021 off-season, the Marseille-born stopper has adapted remarkably quickly to his new life in the Bundesliga. A force of nature, vigorous, robust and athletic. He can be a little naive on occasion, but he is only 21 and should become more focused with experience. He has good pace and is not at all shoddy technically.

Luka Sucic



Red Bull Salzburg
This 19-year-old Croatian may not be the quickest or the most disciplined pressing midfielder, but he more than makes up for those deficiencies with his outstanding ball skills, vision, creativity and elegance. Born in the Austrian city of Linz to Croat parents, he won his first senior Croatia cap last year in a World Cup qualifier versus Slovakia, saying it was a dream come true to be in the same squad as Luka Modric.

John Tolkin

New York Red Bulls
Amongst the most accomplished teenagers in Major League Soccer today. Mature, purposeful and ultra-consistent, the diminutive 19-year-old has a lot of positional strings to his bow: at home at left-back, as a wing-back or serving as a search-and-destroy midfielder. Does his best work when advancing in wide positions, combining well with his team-mates and putting in accurate, reliable final balls.

DV9

The most expensive transfer of the year has aspirations for goalscoring greatness

Words: Nick Bidwell

Rapier-sharp Serbia striker Dusan Vlahovic, recently acquired by Italian giants Juventus from Fiorentina for a hefty €75 million, is experiencing that black-and-white-striped feeling once again. Six years after emerging as a teen sensation with hometown club Partizan Belgrade, he is now sporting exactly the same colours at Juventus.

Nicknamed "DV9" for his goalscoring prowess wearing the No.9 shirt at both of his former clubs, Vlahovic has been furnished with the No.7 jersey at Juventus. But it is undoubtedly a matter of time before he eventually inherits his favourite number at his new club too. You could say this was a move written in the stars.

The powerful yet adroit Vlahovic, fresh from scoring 37 Serie A goals in 18 months for Fiorentina, faces the ultimate challenge at *La Vecchia Signora*. Juventus see the 22-year-old as the man to spearhead their much-needed relaunch and to this end have invested a reported €150m on the complete financial package, with the eye-watering figure made up of transfer fee, wages and bonuses.

Already in double figures for caps for Serbia, Vlahovic would waste no time presenting his calling card at the Juventus Stadium, scoring just 13 minutes into his debut, a 2-0 home win over Verona. A couple of weeks on, he would repeat the dose, scoring just 33 seconds into his Champions League debut in a 1-1 draw with Villarreal.

Fiorentina fans have held a long-standing hatred of Juventus; an enmity

COPPA ITALIA

Eternal derby... Vlahovic in action for Partizan Belgrade against Red Star

Timeline

APR 16, 2015
Scores a hat-trick against the Czech Republic for Serbia's Under-15 team.

FEB 21, 2016
Becomes the youngest debutant in Partizan's history by playing against OFK Belgrade.

spawned by the Serie A title race in 1981-82 (when Juve pipped them to the domestic crown in controversial circumstances) and the Turin club's purchase in 1990 of Roberto Baggio. So it was hardly a surprise when the Fiorentina faithful reacted with fury to Vlahovic's decision to join Juventus.

This vicious divorce had been several months in the making. Fiorentina's announcement back in October that Vlahovic would not be renewing his contract very much drove a wedge between the Serbian striker and club ultras. The atmosphere at the Artemio Franchi stadium would turn even more sour when, just a few weeks later, Vlahovic decided not to take a spot-kick in a league game against Cagliari. Did he pass because sections of the crowd had been relentlessly jeering him? Quite possibly so.

Shame that this marriage made in Tuscany should end so messily and acrimoniously. Not so long ago, in the second half of last season, it was an entirely different story, with Vlahovic scoring goal upon goal and feted for almost single-handedly keeping *La Viola* away from the relegation zone. Supporters then could not praise him enough.

His 33 Serie A goals in 2021 undeniably point to a marksman of the highest calibre. Only the inimitable Cristiano Ronaldo has ever done so well in a calendar year in the Italian top flight, netting the same number of goals in 2020.

Historically, Fiorentina have boasted many great marksmen – Kurt Hamrin, Gabriel Batistuta and Luca Toni to name just three – but even they were never able to match Vlahovic's immense output over 12 months.

Whatever Fiorentina supporters think of Vlahovic now that he has flown the nest, the fact remains that their sporting director Pantaleo Corvino pulled off a real coup when landing the young Partizan striker some five years ago. Corvino, one of Italian football's most astute talent-spotters, successfully struck a preliminary deal for the then 17-year-old in the summer of 2017, eventually bringing him to Italy the following summer for just €1.5m; think of the profit margin to come.

"Vlahovic, for me, was a natural," Corvino told *Gazzetta dello Sport*. "When I saw him for the first time at the age of 17, what struck me was his physicality allied to his skill, extraordinary instinct for goals and rare levels of determination. Borussia Dortmund, Arsenal, Juventus and Atalanta all had their eyes on him. In order not to lose him, I went to Belgrade to meet his family and invited them over to Milan. In the end, I managed to win the day.

"There was a certain amount of scepticism about his signing. Some wondered why I was filling the last non-EU spot on the squad with an unknown 17-year-old, to spend €1.5m on a minor we couldn't use straightaway."

In his first season at Fiorentina in 2018-19, he was given a few first-team run-outs – one being his senior debut as a substitute in a 2-1 Serie A

Young *Viola*... Fiorentina U19s celebrate winning the Italian Youth Cup

> "When I saw him for the first time at the age of 17, what struck me was his physicality allied to his skill, extraordinary instinct for goals and rare levels of determination"
>
> Former Fiorentina sporting director Pantaleo Corvino

Breakthrough... the Serbian made his Serie A debut in 2018

FEB 27, 2016
Breaks another record by playing against Red Star Belgrade to become the youngest player in the history of the Eternal derby.

APR 2, 2016
Scores his first goal for Partizan in a 3-2 win against Radnik Surdulica, becoming the club's youngest-ever goalscorer.

MAY 11, 2016
Scores in the 2015-16 Serbian Cup final against Javor Ivanjica, helping his side to a 2-0 win.

JUL 21, 2016
Makes his European debut in a Europa League qualifier against Poland's Zaglebie Lubin.

JUN 23, 2017
Signs an agreement to join Fiorentina on his 18th birthday, and is consequently excluded from the Partizan first team.

Future Juventus stars...Federico Chiesa celebrates a Fiorentina goal with Vlahovic in February 2020

defeat at Internazionale – but was mainly deployed as the youth team leader of the line, so full of physical presence and confidence that he cut the figure of an adult in the schoolyard. An absolutely outstanding front-line focal point for the *Viola* youngsters, he was much to the fore in the conquest of the 2018-19 Italian Youth Cup, scoring three times in the 4-1 aggregate win over Torino in the final.

His *piece de resistance* in those two games was a majestic clipped Panenka penalty in the second leg: top marks for audacity, nerve and execution. Zlatan Ibrahimovic, his favourite player, would have simply loved to net that one.

Despite his brilliance for the youth team, Vlahovic would have to wait quite some time to pin down a regular first-team spot. Fiorentina coaches such as Vincenzo Montella and Giuseppe Iachini believed he was too raw to perform at the top level and in the 2019-20 Serie A season, the youngster was equally likely to start as kick his heels on the bench. Six top-flight goals was not a bad return for a novice striker, but he had expected much, much more.

He had good reason to feel more than a little hard done by. Indeed in December 2019 after scoring a wonderful stoppage-time equaliser at home to Internazionale – racing through from the halfway line before thumping home an unstoppable left-footed shot – he must have thought that his claims could no longer be ignored. Sadly, Montella – who was soon to be sacked – and his successor Iachini begged to differ, continuing to keep him on a restraining lead.

The 2020-21 campaign did not begin at all well for Vlahovic. He only managed one goal in his first ten league appearances that season and even when Cesare Prandelli took over as coach from Iachini in November 2020, he still failed to stir himself, drawing a blank in his first four games for the new boss. Prandelli, though, saw something he liked in the youngster and opted to persevere with him.

As if by magic, Vlahovic suddenly exploded into life, netting in three consecutive Serie A games just before Christmas and hitting even greater heights in the New Year. By the end of the season, he had bagged 21 goals, a haul worthy of fourth place in the national scoring charts.

"Prandelli's arrival at Fiorentina was the turning point of my career," declared Vlahovic in the Serbian publication *MozzartSport*. "We sat down, had a chat and he explained what he wanted from me. He told me not to worry because I had the opportunity to make things happen. Without him, I wouldn't have got on. He had limitless faith in me. I'll always be grateful."

> "Prandelli's arrival at Fiorentina was the turning point of my career...Without him, I wouldn't have got on"
> **Dusan Vlahovic**

Born in the Belgrade municipality of Zemun, a pleasant neighbourhood on the bank of the river Danube,

FEB 22, 2018
Officially joins Fiorentina, yet is unable to play until July.

SEP 25, 2018
Makes his senior debut for Fiorentina in a 2-1 defeat to Internazionale in Serie A.

APR 12, 2019
Wins the Italian Youth Cup by beating Torino in the final, scoring a brace in the first leg of the final and a penalty in the second.

AUG 18, 2019
Opens his goalscoring account for Fiorentina, netting a brace in a 3-1 win against Monza in the Italian Cup.

NOV 10, 2019
Scores for the first time in Serie A, bagging both goals in a 5-2 defeat away to Cagliari.

Making an impression... Vlahovic scores in Fiorentina's 3-0 win at Juventus

Hat-trick hero...Vlahovic poses with the match ball after scoring a hat-trick at Benevento

A substantial height increase in his early teens only made him more formidable as a striker and, at the age of 14, he was headhunted by academy bosses at OFK Belgrade, a one-time big-hitter on the Yugoslavian/Serbian scene with an excellent track record in churning out stars, including 1970s Yugoslav internationals Ilija Petkovic and Slobodan Santrac and, more recently, Branislav Ivanovic and Aleksandar Kolarov.

Young Vlahovic only stayed at OFK for six months, but still left a wholly positive impression. "He was a tall and thin kid, but already had the head of a future champion," OFK general secretary Vladimir Rasic told Fiorentina website *Firenze Viola* last year. "He always had ability and mentality way above average."

It was at this point that Red Star Belgrade launched a bid to sign him, inviting him to try out for their youth team in a friendly against Dinamo Zagreb. Still only 14, Vlahovic was in two minds over the aforementioned trial: like the rest of his family, he was a passionate fan of Red Star's arch-rivals Partizan and did not feel comfortable "guesting for the enemy". Rather reluctantly, he took part, blotting his copybook with a penalty miss.

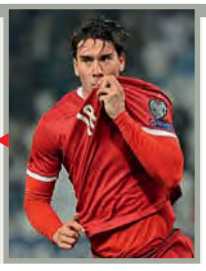
Mentor...former Fiorentina boss Cesare Prandelli

Vlahovic grew up obsessed with sport. He was especially keen on basketball and martial arts, though football was by far his number one love. His parents took him to his first soccer club, Altina Zemun, at the age of just six and over the course of the next eight years there, he would leave observers bewitched by his abundant attacking gifts: his incredible dribbling skills, directness and blistering left-footed shots. He could run rings around opponents, score from any angle and make goals out of nothing.

OCT 11, 2020
Makes his senior debut for Serbia in a UEFA Nations League defeat to Hungary.

NOV 9, 2020
Links up with Cesar Prandelli for the first time, after the manager returns to Fiorentina to replace Giuseppe Iachini.

NOV 18, 2020
Scores his first senior international goal in a 5-0 victory over Russia in the Nations League.



DEC 22, 2020
Scores against Juventus in Fiorentina's first away league victory over the Turin club for 12 years.

MAR 13, 2021
Scores his first career hat-trick in a 4-1 away win over Benevento.

MAY 31, 2021
Is named Serie A's Best Young Player after ending the season with 21 league goals.

Whether due to the off-target spot-kick or another reason, Red Star chose not to proceed. Not long afterwards, Partizan stepped forward to give him his dream move.

At Partizan, his progress was meteoric to say the least. Just 15 when he turned professional with them, he went on to swiftly revise a large chunk of the club's record books, becoming the senior team's youngest debutant (16 years and 24 days), youngest participant in a Partizan-Red Star derby (16 years and 30 days) and youngest goalscorer (16 years and 65 days). He would be part of the squad that twice claimed the Serbian Cup (2015-16 and 2016-17) and won the Serbian SuperLiga in 2016-17.

"Six months before playing in my first big Belgrade derby, I was behind the goal supporting Partizan," he recalled in a conversation with *DAZN*. "When the coach [Ivan Tomic] told me to prepare to go on as a substitute, my first reaction was to turn around and look behind me. I thought he was talking to someone else."

Ivica Iliev, a former Partizan director of sport, insists he always felt that Vlahovic was destined for greatness. "The boy was a phenomenon," gushed Iliev in *Gazzetta dello Sport*. "He had the physique, the technical quality and a good head on his shoulders. Even a Belgrade derby did not frighten this 16-year-old. He has an incredible character. He has no distractions. He only thinks about football and improving his game. He never complains, he never gives up. If he had a free day, he would practise on his own. In training he was a boy possessed. That makes the difference between a good player and a champion."

Fearful that her son's football career might not take off, Vlahovic's mother, a dentist, once advised him to adopt medical studies as a Plan B. Dusan did indeed sign on at the faculty in Belgrade, but that was as far as it went. One doctor less, one more thoroughbred striker.

New arrival...Vlahovic is unveiled at Juventus

Rubbing it in...Juve fans unveil a banner of Vlahovic during their Italian Cup tie against Fiorentina

> "The boy was a phenomenon"
> Former Partizan Belgrade director of sport Ivica Iliev

NOV 14, 2021
Plays every minute of Serbia's dramatic 2-1 victory over Portugal to seal a place at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

JAN 28, 2022
Marks his 22nd birthday by joining Juventus on a four-and-a-half-year contract.

FEB 6, 2022
Makes his Juve debut, scoring the opening goal in a 2-0 win against Verona.

FEB 22, 2022
Makes his first appearance in the Champions League, scoring after 33 seconds in the 1-1 draw away to Villarreal.

MAR 2, 2022
Returns to former club Fiorentina for the first leg of their Italian Cup semi-final, starting in Juve's 1-0 victory.

Dusan Vlahovic

SERIE A TOP SCORERS

Per calendar year since 2000

Year	Player	Goals
2021	Dusan Vlahovic *(Fiorentina)*	33
2020	Cristiano Ronaldo *(Juventus)*	33
2005	Luca Toni *(Palermo/Fiorentina)*	31
2017	Ciro Immobile *(Lazio)*	30
2016	Gonzalo Higuain *(Napoli/Juventus)*	30
2001	Hernan Crespo *(Lazio)*	30

FIORENTINA-JUVENTUS TRANSFERS

- 1990 **Roberto Baggio**
- 2005 **Giorgio Chiellini**
- 2005 **Fabrizio Miccoli**
- 2009 **Felipe Melo**
- 2015 **Neto**
- 2017 **Federicho Bernadeschi**
- 2020 **Federico Chiesa**
- 2022 **Dusan Vlahovic**

SERIE A BEST YOUNG PLAYER

- 2018-19 **NICOLO ZANIOLO** *(Roma)*
- 2019-20 **DEJAN KULUSEVSKI** *(Parma)*
- 2020-21 **DUSAN VLAHOVIC** *(Fiorentina)*

SERBIA

14

CAPS

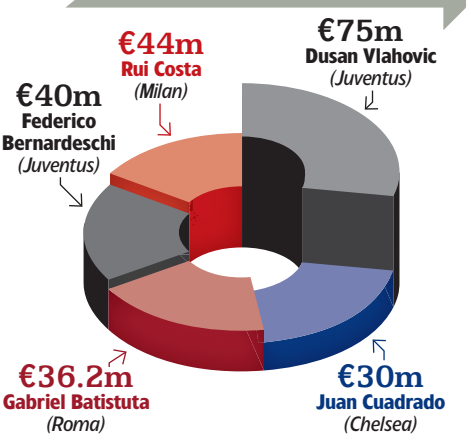
GOALS

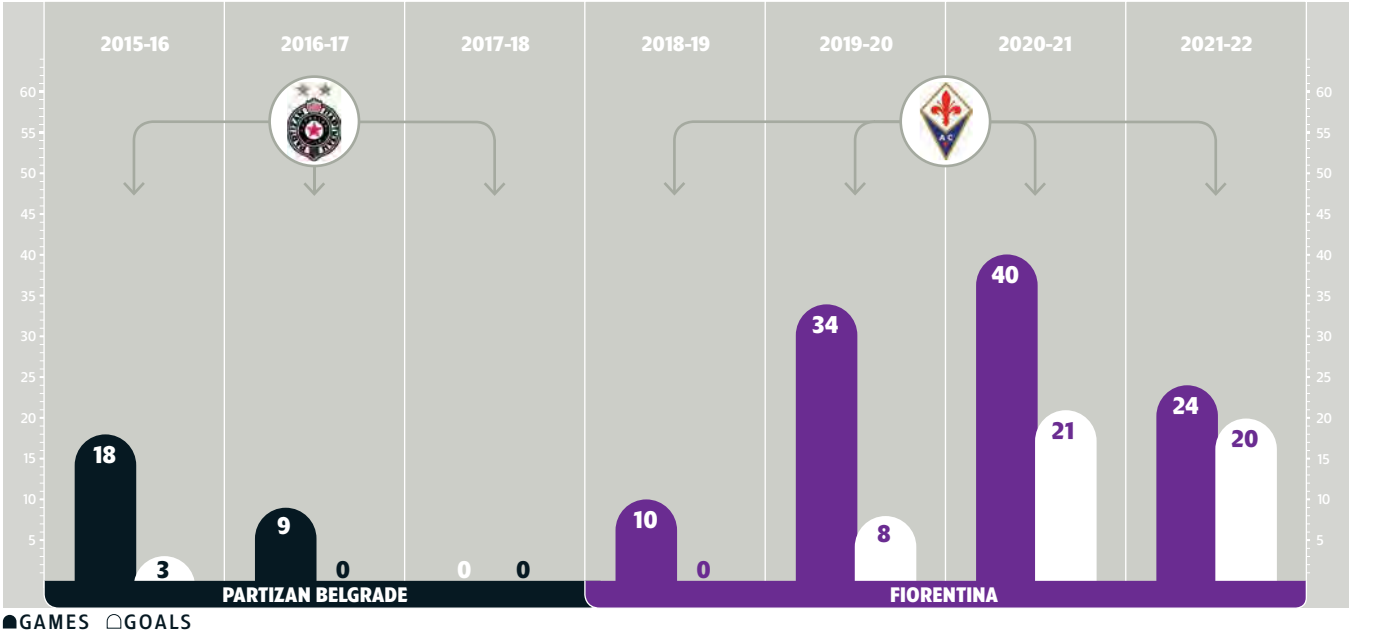
7

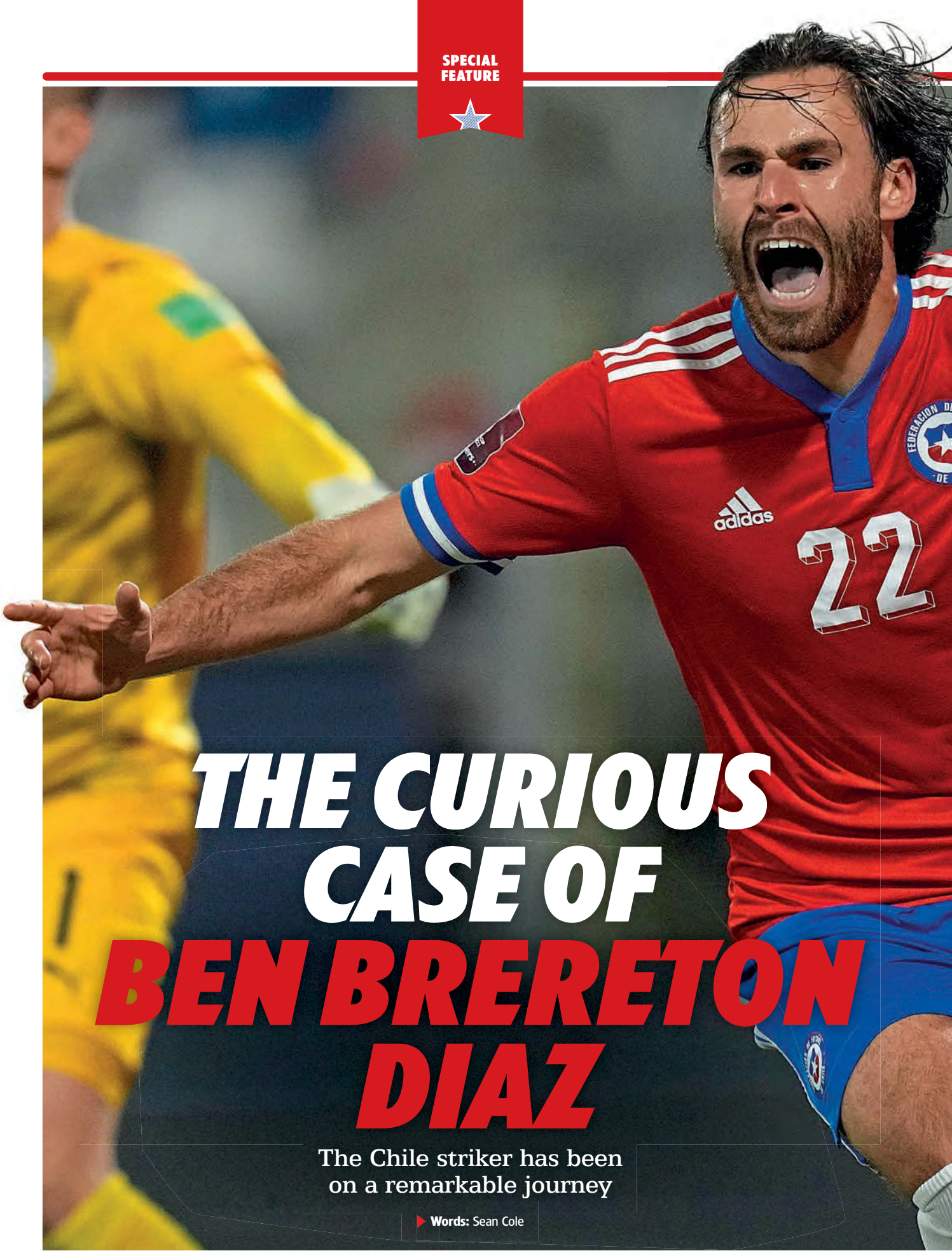
SERIE A RECORD TRANSFERS

€100m	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** 2018 *(Real Madrid to Juventus)*
€81m	**GONZALO HIGUAIN** 2016 *(Napoli to Juventus)*
€80m	**ROMELU LUKAKU** 2019 *(Manchester United to Inter)*
€75m	**MATTHIJS DE LIGT** 2019 *(Ajax to Juventus)*
€75m	**DUSAN VLAHOVIC** 2022 *(Fiorentina to Juventus)*
€72m	**ARTHUR** 2020 *(Barcelona to Juventus)*
€55m	**HERNAN CRESPO** 2000 *(Parma to Lazio)*
€52m	**GIANLUIGI BUFFON** 2001 *(Parma to Juventus)*
€50m	**VICTOR OSIMHEN** 2020 *(Lille to Napoli)*
€49m	**CHRISTIAN VIERI** 1999 *(Lazio to Inter)*

FIORENTINA'S BIGGEST SALES







THE CURIOUS CASE OF BEN BRERETON DIAZ

The Chile striker has been on a remarkable journey

Words: Sean Cole

Perseverance has always been one of Ben Brereton Diaz's defining qualities. Whether it's recovering from the blow of being released by Manchester United and then Stoke City, or finally confounding the critics at Blackburn Rovers in spectacular style, he is not a player that gives up without a fight.

That mental strength was clear to see in his first pre-season as a Nottingham Forest player. The club had acted quickly to sign him after he wasn't offered an apprenticeship by Stoke, his hometown club, and he was eager to impress. For Jack Lester, the Under-18s' manager, one moment in particular stands out.

"We had a very tough programme at Forest at that time," he recalls. "We did some character-building work up in the Lake District. The challenge at the end of the day was to take a log up the mountain. He was one of the youngest, but he was the first up there. That always stuck in my mind – that determination and resilience he had to be a winner."

Lester liked what he saw on the pitch too. Brereton Diaz was a well-rounded player with some promising raw ingredients. "Strong runner. Very good movement. Good feet. Good finisher," recalls the former Forest, Sheffield United and Chesterfield striker. "He was 16 years old then, so he hadn't grown into his body, but I just loved everything about him. I loved the way he trained. I loved his mentality and work ethic. He just really impressed.

"He never missed a session. He was a joy to coach. We had a good working relationship. I did a lot of finishing work with the strikers, nearly every day. I was strong with him, but he knew I believed in him. That was important.

"We worked on goalscoring, movement, hold-up play – everything. We did a lot of finishing work – scoring from crosses, getting across people, things like that. He was really good in the finishing sessions. He hit a really clean ball. He was focused and, with the way he trained, he was always going to get better. We were really excited about him."

Brereton Diaz justified the hype. He scored 28 goals in his first season at Forest as the Under-18s finished top of their division. Promoted to the Under-23s, he netted 15 times in 20 games and was rewarded with his first professional contract in December 2016.

"We beat QPR away 5-0. They had quite an experienced team out and Ben scored four," says Lester. "He was up against centre-halves who'd played a lot of league football and he ran them ragged to be honest. You could see he had the quality to cope with first-team players."

When Lester and Gary Brazil took caretaker charge after Philippe Montanier's sacking a month later, Brereton Diaz was given his senior debut away to Leeds United. His emergence was one of the few bright spots of a dismal season as Forest avoided relegation by goal difference on the final day.

He contributed to their survival with three goals, including an injury-time winner against Aston Villa in just his third appearance. After Jack Grealish was sent off, the home side made their advantage count. Daniel Pinillos cut inside to swing over a cross, Britt Assombalonga won the header and Brereton Diaz volleyed in off the post to send the City Ground wild.

After being named the Championship

Apprentice of the Year at the 2017 EFL Awards, Brereton Diaz capped his breakthrough with a place in Keith Downing's squad for the European Under-19 Championship that summer. Along with Ryan Sessegnon, he was the joint-top scorer for a victorious England side featuring future internationals Aaron Ramsdale, Reece James and Mason Mount.

Uncertainty still prevailed at Forest. Brereton Diaz made 39 appearances in all competitions during his first full season and was often used out wide because of his energy and work rate. It's been a theme in his career so far, but Lester believes he's much better suited to playing centrally.

"He offers a lot in those positions because of his running power and his intelligence, but I always felt his best position was through the middle. I always felt he was a number nine. I think he might have stalled slightly when he was playing out wide, but as soon he's gone back to playing down the middle he's been brilliant again."

Established as one of the brightest young prospects outside the Premier League, Brereton Diaz joined Blackburn Rovers in August 2018. It was a serious statement of intent from a club that had just won promotion from the third tier. He initially arrived on loan, before the deal was made permanent for £7 million in the January transfer window. The fee, however, would weigh heavily on him.

"It was difficult for him at the beginning, particularly with the price tag, even though that was never his fault," says former Rovers winger Elliott Bennett. "Ben was only young and sometimes it can take a while to adapt to a new club and being away from home. They're things that a lot of people don't take into consideration.

"You always want to hit the ground running, score goals and be a big part of the team. That didn't quite happen for him – he wasn't playing week in, week out – and then it becomes difficult. You start questioning whether you made the right decision and when it's going to work out for you."

Doubts crept in, and supporters became increasingly disgruntled, as Brereton Diaz's wait for his first goal dragged on. Manager Tony Mowbray preached patience and understanding. He was a signing for the future, based on potential rather than a proven track record.

It took 27 games for Brereton Diaz to finally break his duck, finding the net against Bolton in the penultimate game of the season. He hoped to kick on from there but continued to face long spells on the fringes until the pandemic intervened. Determined to make the most of the unexpected break, he came back in top condition.

"The first lockdown was quite a big turning point," explains Bennett. "He worked incredibly hard behind the scenes on his upper-body strength when we weren't going into the training ground. He took it on himself to do those extras that you can't when you're playing all the time. Coming back, you could see a difference in his body and the way he held himself."

The absence of crowds was another advantage. He could focus solely on his own performance, without any outside distractions. "No one enjoyed last season in terms of not having fans in the stadium, but I think Bezza was one of the players that it massively helped. He thrived, without hitting the numbers that he has this season. The signs were there. His confidence was building."

If the young striker had thrived from being away from the spotlight, he was soon to be thrust into it, in a way that very few people could have predicted.

The story of how Brereton Diaz

Breakthrough ...Brereton Diaz celebrates scoring against Fulham in the 2016-17 season

England Under-19s...the striker scored five goals in 18 appearances for the Young Lions

came to the attention of Chile, the country where his mother was born, thanks to a group of supporters who noticed his eligibility on the computer game *Football Manager*, is well told. What started as a speculative online campaign soon gathered irresistible momentum.

For a player that had faced so many doubters and critics, receiving a call-up to play senior international football – thanks to a fans' campaign – took his self-belief to another level entirely.

Brereton Diaz was included in the squad for the 2021 Copa America, making his debut against a Leo Messi-led Argentina in the opening group game. Bolivia were up next and, ten minutes into his first start, Brereton Diaz mania went into overdrive as he grabbed what proved to be the winning goal.

Eduardo Vargas flicked the ball inside to the unmarked Blackburn striker, who showed composure to sidle past a covering defender and plant his shot firmly into the bottom corner. Scenes of disbelieving celebration played out in Stoke and Santiago alike: Chile had a new hero.

Historic...Chile celebrate Brereton Diaz's goal v Bolivia

Red-hot form... Brereton had hit 20 Championship goals by mid-March

Brereton Diaz was involved in every game as *La Roja* reached the quarter-finals, eventually defeated by Brazil. The tournament boosted his profile beyond recognition, being serenaded by supporters and featuring in quirky adverts for Pepsi and Scotiabank. His team-mates were taken aback by the speed of his transformation.

"I'm not surprised that he's doing well but I'm surprised at how quickly it's turned around for him," reflects Bennett. "That's what he's earned. He's not been given it; he's had to work really hard. The beauty of football is that these things can happen; you can go from not playing to being an international star on the biggest stage.

> "The beauty of football is that these things can happen; you can go from not playing to being an international star on the biggest stage"
>
> **Brereton Diaz's former Blackburn team-mate Elliott Bennett**

"Everyone was delighted for him because he's not had an easy ride. He's a great lad and you wish people like that nothing but the best. He's really funny – daft as a brush – but that makes him really endearing. He doesn't take life too seriously.

"A lot's got to be said for his strength of character. Sometimes it was hard for him at Blackburn when he wasn't playing, and things were getting questioned. It easily could have gone the other way. He could have accepted that he got bought for a lot of money and it hadn't worked out, but he hasn't done that. He's got his head down and grafted."

It is as if his career is in fact the story of two different players: Ben Brereton was a doubtful, tentative striker with little over a dozen Championship goals in five seasons to his name; Ben Brereton Diaz is a confident, unstoppable scoring sensation whose 20 goals have underpinned Blackburn's promotion push, completely at home alongside global superstars like Alexis Sanchez and Arturo Vidal.

Adding Diaz to his name is not just simply a representation of his Chilean heritage, it is as though it has made him a new and improved version of himself almost overnight.

"The confidence within him has grown that much now," adds Bennett. "He's taken on the responsibility of being the main man and scoring the goals. That's great credit to him and I hope it can continue."

Leeds and West Ham United were heavily linked with Brereton Diaz in January. Rovers were willing to sell for the right price: £28.5m, according to reports. While nobody was willing to meet that figure on this occasion, the Premier League surely awaits. And Lester, his former mentor, sees no reason for the 22-year-old to stop there.

"I used to talk to Ben about playing in the Champions League," he says. "That's where I thought he could get to. I always thought the sky was the limit for Ben. He's one of the top scorers in the Championship. He's doing well in international football. It's not a surprise – not to me anyway.

"I always felt he could go a long way because he caused so many problems for defenders with the way he played. We just wanted him to believe in himself like we did."

THE AFRICAN SUPER LEAGUE

If plans to introduce a new club competition in Africa come to fruition, football on the continent will change forever

Words: Mark Gleeson

The bid to create a Super League in Europe might have crashed and burned in spectacular fashion but plans for a similar project in Africa are being relentlessly pushed.

The man appearing to take the lead in trying to persuade clubs to join is FIFA president Gianni Infantino. He might have ultimately criticised last year's attempts by top European clubs to form their own Super League, but in Africa he has no qualms about showing his support for the project, even going as far as leading symposiums to explain the concept to African clubs to try to win them over.

It has become a pet project, one that has been enthusiastically backed by acolyte Patrice Motsepe, whose elevation to the helm of the Confederation of African Football one year ago was approved by Infantino.

African clubs – almost all of whom lose money competing in continental club competition – have been told they stand to profit considerably and have therefore given the concept an enthusiastic ear, even if many are still sceptical about whether it will see the light of day – or more importantly, prove successful.

Infantino has to "show the money" and he and Motsepe have spent considerable time trying to find investors and sponsors since Motsepe's election to the CAF presidency in March 2021. But initial plans for an August kick-off look a massive stretch as the search for backers continues.

Club officials have told *World Soccer* the project has an air of "disorganisation" about it, even if Infantino himself led a February workshop in Cameroon when clubs were invited to hear of the plans, and, at the same time, attend the Africa Cup of Nations final between Egypt and Senegal in Yaounde.

Former Arsenal manager and current FIFA Chief of Global Football Development, Arsene Wenger, was also brought along to try to sell the project, with 40 clubs invited to attend the

Uncertain future... where would an African Super League fit in the calendar and what would it mean for the CAF Champions League?

workshop – even though only around half of them would be able to take part in the project under its initial plans.

Originally the idea was a league of 20 fixed teams – chosen by reputation, size and support – each paying a $1 million entry fee, with four extra places for sides to compete for, perhaps through a watered-down Champions League.

It then changed to three groups of eight teams to play along regional lines (North Africa, Central/West Africa and South/East Africa), then whittled down to a knockout stage of 16 teams – a format that in reality almost replicates the current structure of the African Champions League.

It is also planned that the Champions League and the secondary competition, the African Confederation Cup, will stay in place, which begs the question: what is the point of the Super League and where will they find the dates to play it?

At the symposium, clubs were told it would require 12 extra matchdays, prompting questions from Al Ahly coach Pitso Mosimane.

"I don't know when and how you're going to play it," said the South African. "Where do you want to put it? With a FIFA Arab Cup one month, CAF Champions League one month, World Cup half a month, and the league – where are you going to put it?"

The Cairo giants have won the last two Champions League competitions but, with all their other commitments combined with their players regularly off on international duty, have looked exhausted in the first part of 2022.

Yet despite the flimsy concept, clubs' interest has been piqued by the chance to earn some much-needed revenue; there has been none of the virulent condemnation of the project that quickly scuppered the idea in Europe. Now the attitude is: "Wait and see what is brought to the table before we say anything," as one official told *World Soccer*.

Al Ahly officials recently bemoaned the fact that Africa's most successful club – with ten Champions League titles to their name and chasing a record-breaking third successive title this season – lose money every time they win.

African champions... supporters of Al Ahly

Teaming up...CAF president Patrice Motsepe with FIFA's Gianni Infantino

"For the last 20 years, every club in Africa has been losing money playing in the Champions League," said their president Mahmoud El Khatib.

The long distances that clubs have to travel across the continent eat up the income from the competition's marketing and television revenue. There are none of the riches of the UEFA Champions League swirling in the African pot.

Currently, only the 16 clubs that qualify for the group stages of both the Champions League and Confederation Cup earn any prize money.

The Champions League winners get $2.5m, plus the added boost of money from participating in FIFA's Club World Cup. But the side finishing fourth in the group stage takes home $550,000 – not enough to cover the cost of travel, let alone any other expenses.

In the Confederation Cup, it is even paltrier at $1.25m for the winner to $275,000 to the teams who finish bottom of the four groups.

It is little wonder that all the clubs who have spoken to *World Soccer*

European objections...a graffiti depiction of Juventus president Andrea Agnelli

about the African Super League are looking for a change to the club landscape on the continent, even if the concept of a Super League is sportingly unfair and a contrived competition.

Those against the idea in Europe sprung into action and piled a *blitzkrieg* of condemnation down on the concept, keeping Infantino in the shadows and sending the likes of Juventus' Andrea Agnelli and Real Madrid's Florentino Perez scurrying for the hills.

But in Africa, reaction has been largely muted, with almost no public debate never mind condemnation.

There is none of the passionate devotion to the African Champions League that there is for the UEFA version, even while the honour of winning continental glory is keenly sought after, especially in Arabic-speaking North Africa.

The muddled messages about the African Super League, and the proposals around its format, have also met with little comment, either in the media or among ordinary supporters.

Infantino was the first to suggest the idea as he looks to Africa as something of a petri dish for his ideas on the future of the game. It was two years ago that he told the CAF Congress: "I hope CAF has realised that the time has come to change everything."

Among his many proposals was the creation of a Super League that, he claimed at the time, would generate at least $200m per year.

He made the point that the African Champions League had no allure because all the star African players were at clubs outside of the continent and that if Africa wanted to keep its talent at home, it had to find the money to match the riches elsewhere. This is undeniably true, with more than 1,000 African players earning a decent professional living, and many more daily trying to find fame and fortune, in Europe.

The African Champions League was reorganised in 1997 to try to replicate its European counterpart but has bumbled along over the last two decades without capturing the imagination of the whole continent – never mind the rest of the world. It is beset by poor television coverage and regular controversy, with little means or willpower to improve.

"Competitions in Africa are maybe 30 or 40 or 50 times less successful than in Europe," Infantino asserted and Motsepe has said regularly over the last year that he wants to create "world-class African competition" that will attract multiple sponsors, lucrative television deals and allow clubs previously unthinkable resources.

> "For the last 20 years, every club in Africa has been losing money playing in the Champions League"
>
> **Al Ahly president Mahmoud El Khatib**

More meetings are set for mid-year to try to move the project along. The owner of DR Congo champions TP Mazembe, Moise Katumbi, has been pushing for the start to come sooner rather than later but the latest from the corridors of power suggest mid-2023, once the next AFCON finals in the Ivory Coast are complete.

Infantino has put pressure on himself to deliver. He has a ready-made powerbase in Africa as FIFA continue to liberally fund the member football associations with annual cash grants but he will lose support if he fails to deliver on his claims about the Super League. In the end it is all about the cash – whether a Super League will have any legitimacy in the marketplace or not.

ANDRES INIESTA

"I'd love to return to Barcelona"

The former Barcelona and Spain midfielder sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss life in Japan, his old team-mate Xavi in the Nou Camp dugout, and the highlights of his incredible career

You've been living in Japan since 2018. Do you feel at home there now or do you still miss Spain?
I'd say that we miss home a lot. Above all, because of the recent situation of not being able to get back and our family not being able to visit. It's been very difficult for everyone. It's true that changes always generate a bit of stress, but since the first day we arrived we've felt great here and that feeling has grown both on a sporting and family level. We're very happy here.

On the pitch, what have you made of the standard of the Japanese league and how does it compare to playing in Europe?
They're different. Different levels or however you want to call it, but it's not something that I view as a negative. What I can say is that since I arrived the league has improved a lot. It's grown a lot and, above all, it's a very competitive league. That competitiveness is something that I like, and something I was looking for when I left Barcelona. I honestly feel overjoyed here because I'm still looking after myself as I was before in order to perform to the best of my ability and I'm happy on a sporting level.

There are three graduates from *La Masia* now at Vissel Kobe in yourself, Sergi Samper and Bojan. Did they get in touch with you before joining?
Yeah, I spoke with them before they joined. At the end of the day, it's a big change and they had some of the typical questions like: "What's the place like?" "What's life like here?" "What's the club like?" "How does it all work?" All the usual worries you might have. It's been very positive; above all having some familiar faces is always appreciated.

There's a foreign player limit currently in Japan, but can you see more players from Europe joining the league in the future?
I would recommend it, without a doubt. As I said before, it's a competitive and demanding league. In fact, there are quite a lot of Europeans already playing here. There's always been a lot of Brazilians; a connection that Japan has always had. But every season there are new players, as well as those who continue in the league, and I think it's on the rise. It's one of the goals this league has – to keep improving and for more players from abroad to come. It's improving the quality of the league and those of us who arrive also learn a lot from being here.

Likewise, a few J.League players have moved to Europe – for example Kyogo Furuhashi, Reo Hatate, Yosuke Ideguchi and Daizen Maeda at Celtic. Do you think more Japanese players will make the move in the future?
There are players with quality and above all young players and, at the end of the day, it is normal for them to want to make the jump to Europe or other more prestigious leagues. There are already players who have left and more will follow them.

You've lifted the Emperor's Cup and the Japanese Super Cup, and played in Vissel Kobe's first-ever AFC Champions League campaign, but you also needed surgery after a hamstring injury. How would you sum up your time in Japan so far?
I would say very positive; above all, because I'm still enjoying my football. I still feel excited about going to train, about winning, about helping my team-mates and my club. I think that's even more important than the trophies. Evidently having won two trophies with a club that hadn't won anything before, which had never participated in the AFC Champions League, there are some super positive, incredible things for the club. To still be a part of that obviously makes me happy and it helps to keep me motivated and makes me excited about continuing to grow.

How do you feel physically now?
Good. At the beginning of every season, after pre-season, it always takes a while to get back into the rhythm of games. But that comes with time and above all I feel good in myself. As you mentioned, a year ago I had a serious injury from which I recovered really well and I finished the season in phenomenal form. This season has started in the same way so I'm excited and motivated to have another great season.

You signed a new two-year contract with Vissel Kobe on your 37th birthday. Before that, some sources suggested that you were considering retiring. Did that really pass through your mind?
No, in all honesty, it didn't. If it had done, I would tell you, but at the moment it hasn't. As I mentioned earlier, I still have the same feeling that us footballers have when we train, play and compete. The day will arrive when things don't feel the same as before but currently I feel good, happy and ready for another year. ➤

Regain
Rakuten toto
Rakuten
VISSEL

Ex-Barca team-mates...David Villa, Sergi Samper and Iniesta pose with the 2019 Emperor's Cup

Do you have any remaining ambitions for what is left of your contract?
I know time isn't on my side but my ambition for now is to carry on enjoying playing football. I want to look after myself in order to play to the best of my ability and to help my club. On top of that, obviously as a club we have our goals and objectives, and we'll always try our utmost to achieve them. But my big challenge is to keep enjoying playing and for the fans and spectators to still feel proud to watch me play.

And do you have any thoughts yet on what you want to do next?
Sometimes I consider some things, and sometimes others. Honestly, I don't know exactly the what, where or how. One thing for sure is that I would like for it to be linked to football, as it's my life and passion. It won't be playing, which is what I enjoy the most, but I'll try to make it related to football and from there we'll see.

Setback...Iniesta walks off the pitch dejected after tearing a muscle during an AFC Champions League tie

You've said in the past that you would be interested in coaching. Is that still among your plans?
Yes, I have thought about it. It's true that I would like to get my coaching badges. It's something I'd like to do, although I don't know whether I'll use them or not. Let's see what happens. But as I said, I haven't got any clear plan in mind just yet...

So those Barcelona fans who dream of seeing you alongside Xavi in the Camp Nou dugout will have to wait...
It's difficult because of the timings and because Xavi has been preparing himself to be a coach for years, and obviously he already has his own staff. To speak about something like that is extremely far-fetched. As I've always said, I'd love to return to Barcelona in one form or another, helping in whichever way I can.

You formed the Iniesta Methodology Camp in Spain in 2013 and have since held them in Japan as well. Could you tell us a little bit about why you formed the soccer academy and the methodology behind them?
For kids that want to get into football, having a good foundation is key for their development and growth. What we try to transmit and teach is a way of understanding football and life in general; how to train and how to behave.

> "I think it's positive that Xavi is coach and his first months have been positive"

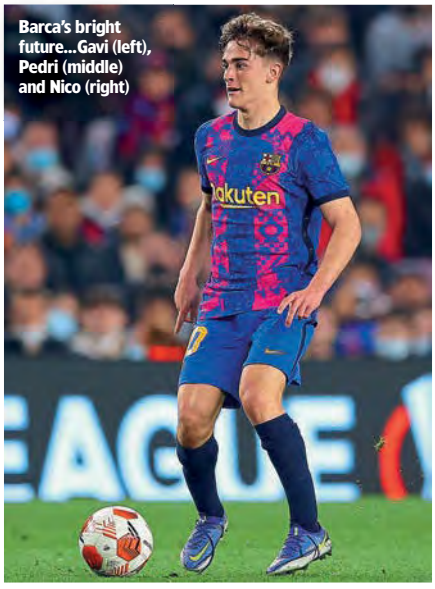
Beyond the technical and tactical aspects, it's a way of understanding the sport. When we came to Japan, one of the priorities was to create these academies and try to show people what I've learnt throughout my career and what I think has served me well to grow as a footballer.

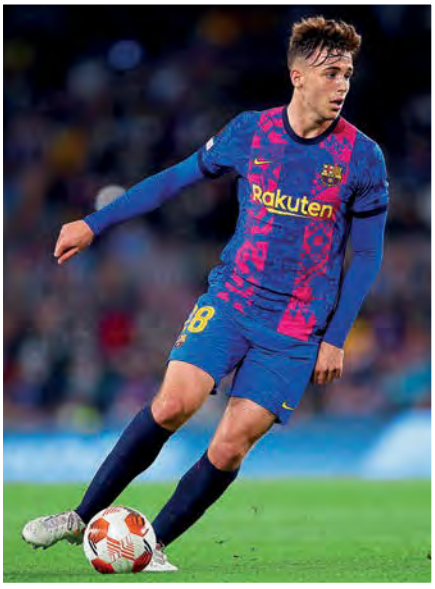
And you obviously had some of the best training available at *La Masia*...
What you learn is a way of playing football, a way of understanding the game. You also learn to live with others and to grow through the passion of football and the ball. From then on, as you work through the age groups, you start creating your pathway.

Do you still watch Barcelona regularly? What do you make of Xavi's work so far?
I see the highlights or the news articles. They almost always play in the middle of the night for me, which makes it difficult. But one way or another, I'm always up to date.

I think it's positive that Xavi is coach and his first months have been positive. It's always

Welcome to Japan... Iniesta is introduced at Vissel Kobe's Noevir Stadium





Barca's bright future...Gavi (left), Pedri (middle) and Nico (right)

difficult at the beginning and they're giving him time to implement his way of playing and for the players to transmit that on to the pitch and improve from there on. I have no doubt that it's already happening and will continue to happen. I'm convinced.

Will it be possible for him to recreate something similar to the Barcelona of 2009 under Pep Guardiola?

No team is the same. There aren't the same players, for a start. It's a different era, different rivals. Everything changes. I think the most important thing is that Barca keeps being Barca; it has its style, its way of playing. They clearly still have some very good players, as we're seeing. It's a case of growing, improving and becoming a reliable team that can challenge for titles.

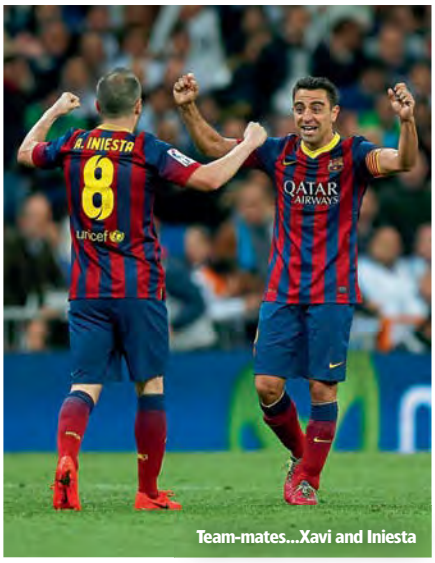
Xavi previously suggested that Nico, Gavi and Pedri can be the next Sergio Busquets, Xavi and Iniesta, What are your thoughts on that comparison?

I hope so! Time will tell. I can't see the comparison myself. At the end of the day, these are very young players who are at the beginning of their careers; they've got a long way to go. Obviously they're players with talent, who are already important players for Barcelona. They've got many years ahead of them and can become real focal points for the club and form a spectacular central midfield. They need to surround themselves with good people and keep on growing.

What do you think makes the perfect central midfielder?
It depends on what you're looking for and what the coach wants from them. I don't think perfection exists but a midfielder needs to know how to position himself, keep control of the ball, know where to move the ball, how to control the game, and understand what happens on the pitch. The midfielder makes the team play and marks the style of the team basically.

A Barcelona midfielder needs to be precise, very dynamic and must understand what the coach wants from him. For example, I always admired Pep Guardiola, he was one of the players that I first took notice of and wanted to play like.

Is scoring the World Cup winner in 2010 at the very top of your career highlights?
For what it meant and for everything that came with it, that moment will always be historic. When we're no longer around, it will still be remembered. It's a moment in history and to have lived it is incredible. Even today, after all



Team-mates...Xavi and Iniesta

Dramatic...celebrating a last-gasp goal away to Chelsea in the Champions League

these years, it still thrills me to think about it.

It was magical. In the moment you score the goal, you forget about everything else. You start to run, to shout, then your team-mates arrive; it's just madness.

What do you make of Luis Enrique as a manager – both from playing under him at Barcelona and watching him as the current Spain coach?

I like him. I think the decision to appoint him was a real hit, because I know how he is and how he works. I think he's doing well. They came very close to success at last summer's Euros. It's about small details but he's creating a very good and competitive group of players and I hope they can fight for this year's World Cup.

Decisive...Iniesta's winning goal in the 2010 World Cup final

> "Euro 2008 changed the mentality of the Spanish national side. We realised that we were capable of winning important trophies with that group of players"

Can they win it?

Sure. Why not? It's a team that will compete. I've got a lot of hope and a lot of faith in them. Obviously, winning those type of tournaments always depends on a lot of things that have to go your way or situations that may see you knocked out. But I think we have to have a lot of trust in the Spanish national side.

What does it take to win a World Cup?

It depends on specific moments. Like whether the ball goes in, a penalty that goes wide or gets saved or a red card. Many things have to align for a team to go the distance, which is why it's hard to win a World Cup or other important tournaments.

Interview by Jared Tinslay

"The Iniesta Final"...the legendary midfielder lifts the 2018 Copa del Rey trophy after Barcelona's 5-0 win over Sevilla

ARNAR VIDARSSON

"My football philosophy is more Belgian than Icelandic"

Iceland coach Arnar Vidarsson looks ahead to a busy June and building a new team for an island nation that continues to punch above its weight

Being the coach of Iceland but living in Belgium must make your job particularly demanding?
I am about 50 per cent of the time in Iceland, and the other half of the time I work from home in Belgium. But it's actually a plus, in my opinion, because we have had less travelling with COVID in the past year and a half. To be able to travel to Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, England – wherever players are playing to go and scout games – is actually easier from Belgium. I get the best of both worlds. I see a lot of games in Iceland during the summertime. And then in the winter I can see more games from our players live.

You recently had the chance to play Spain in a friendly international – what were you looking to get out of that game?
It's important to play games against really strong opponents. It's easy to get games against teams that are maybe ranked lower, but it's important for our players to get the experience of playing against teams that play at a top level, not only technically, but also tempo wise. Last year, we played Germany in our World Cup qualifying group and what we learnt when you look at the numbers and the data from the games, is that the tempo they play at, both with the speed of the ball and with the speed of their running, is just phenomenal. And it's important for our players to play those games, at that tempo, to get closer to that level – especially when you have young players like we have now.

So how disappointing was it then to go down to Group B in the Nations League?
When we were playing in Nations League A and we had the opportunity to play friendlies, we chose to play against teams ranked below us because we had all of those big games in Nations League A. Now in Nations League B we have two teams around the same level as us in Albania and Israel. So that is also the reason why we were looking, for example, for that friendly against Spain, to mix it up and get games against really, really strong teams.

Were you pleased with the Nations League draw? These days it seems more important in terms of offering a backdoor qualification for major tournaments...
Yes, but it's becoming a tough competition on its own. With the World Cup in November, the FIFA dates have been changed a little bit. For example, we are looking at a FIFA window in June with four games, which is, of course, the first time in history where you have four qualification games in the same window. And it's almost as if you're playing a final tournament. You can actually compare it to going to the Euros; going through the group stage, playing three games and then having one more match in the next round. It's actually a big challenge for a football association like us to organise.

I'm not so worried about the players, because I know the players are used to playing a lot of games. For them that's not the challenge – the challenge is we're going to have a lot of travelling. And then you need to have a federation and a staff around the team that can have it properly organised, with all of those kilometres to travel from game to game.

How much does Iceland's success at the Euros in France in 2016 still resonate? Is that legacy now almost like a burden?
I don't see it as a burden. I think we have to acknowledge and we have to be really, really proud of what the team achieved. And you have to, first of all, be realistic and know that a team always has a beginning and an end.

That's how it is with national teams. You need to build a new team every now and then. And that's what we are actually doing right now.

You have to see it as a gift that we did so well in 2016, because now we know we can do it again. But it takes time. And I think that my responsibility as a coach is to try to look a little bit further down the line, a little bit more medium and long-term, to ensure that those successes will be real again in the near future.

How much are you looking to refresh your team over the next year or so? Is there an active policy to bring in a lot of younger players? Does a country like Iceland need to do that given its limited resources in terms of player numbers?
Yeah, that's the challenging thing, to get the right balance. When you have a national team, it's actually just about putting the best players out on the pitch. It's not like club level, where you might be a developing club who are just trying to develop and sell players. National teams are all about the results. So we're always thinking about and trying to put the best team on the pitch.

That being said, it is my responsibility now as coach to look a little bit more medium and long-term and to try to mix those things up. We have some really good talent coming through and if we want to speed up their development, they need to play international games because that's where they get the experience.

Is there something in the Belgian model that you are able to bring to Iceland? Belgium get a lot of credit for the way they have brought youth through and become a world footballing superpower. Is there something that you can copy?
First of all, my DNA is Icelandic, so I've got Icelandic values – from growing up in Iceland, being a player in Iceland and becoming an international. But of course, I moved away from Iceland when I was 19. And I actually do believe that a lot of people in Iceland see me a little bit as a foreigner, and I think it's normal. I've been living the larger part of my life abroad. I played my whole career in Belgium and the Netherlands, and then I did my coaching badges in Belgium and began coaching in Belgium. So, of course those values are with me on the pitch and as a coach. I have a mix. My DNA is still Icelandic but the idea of my football philosophy is more Belgian than Icelandic.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Glenn Moore

New era of NWSL begins with 2022 campaign

There is plenty of change in this season's National Women's Soccer League

After a torrid 2021, the US women's league must have been tempted to rebrand as NWSL 2.0 for the new season.

It could have been justified too, with significant change taking place during the winter. There are two new teams, one of them with a ground-breaking ownership philosophy, expanding the league into California and taking the competition to a record 12 clubs. Two sides have moved into new stadia, while Kansas City Current (previously known as Kansas City NWSL) have renamed. Champions Washington Spirit are under new ownership after a bitter takeover fight. As for the structure of the league, every team will play each other twice, the first balanced schedule since 2014.

For the first time there is a collective bargaining agreement with the players' union, establishing significant pay increases at the lower end. There is also a new commissioner, Jessica Berman, hired from lacrosse with previous experience in NHL ice hockey.

Most significant of all, only one coach, James Clarkson of Houston Dash, remains from the ten who started last season.

NWSL has traditionally been a safe space for coaches, the lack of relegation pressure leading to a low turnover compared to European leagues. However, it became clear in 2021 NWSL was not a safe space for players. A sexual misconduct scandal, which broke around the hugely successful North Carolina Courage coach Paul Riley – who denies the allegations – broadened into wider revelations of a toxic coaching culture across the league.

When the dust settled five coaches had been forced from their jobs along with commissioner Lisa Baird.

Of the rest, Mark Parsons (Portland Thorns) and Marc Skinner (Orlando Pride) left for jobs with the Netherlands and Manchester United respectively, Freya Coombe crossed the States swapping NJ/NY Gotham FC for Los Angeles-based newcomers Angel City, and Huw Williams moved to a backroom role at Kansas after an unsuccessful year in the dugout as head coach.

The new coaching cohort includes five women, a new high for the league which only had one as recently as 2020. The cultural cringe towards English coaches persists, with six of the 12, though most of those have been coaching in the US for several years.

Of the new faces the most interesting are former England international Casey Stoney, Canadian Rhian Wilkinson and Swede Kim Bjorkegren. Stoney was recruited from Manchester United to set up the new San Diego Wave franchise. Wilkinson, formerly Canada's Under-20s coach, who had a brief spell on the England and Team GB staff, replaces Parsons at Thorns. Bjorkegren has won titles in Sweden and Cyprus and worked in China.

In short, unlike the European leagues, the National Women's Soccer League has returned to being wide open

New arrivals... fans of new club Angel City FC

Stoney, in an interview with *The Athletic*, has already been critical of the US coaching style, which tends to be very command-orientated, and the youth structure which is result-focused and often expensive for parents.

"I had a meeting with the college rookies, just to say: 'Listen, this is your first professional environment, how are you feeling?' And the fear – there's fear, there's genuine fear of making mistakes and the consequences and the repercussions. It horrifies me," Stoney said.

She added she was told American players want to be told what to do. She rejects that, arguing that's merely what they are used to; she wants players who can problem-solve, not look to the bench at the first sign of difficultly.

If it is this new approach that makes Wave's season so fascinating – as well

OL Reign...striker Veronica Latsko celebrates scoring in the NWSL Challenge Cup

as a roster that includes superstars such as Alex Morgan and veteran pros like Abby Dahlkemper, Jodie Taylor and Sofia Jakobsson, alongside unknown rookies – the buzz at fellow newbies Angel City surrounds the owners.

A belief in female empowerment is at the core of the club with actress Natalie Portman headlining a long, female-dominated stellar list of owners also including Eva Longoria, Jessica Chastain, Serena Williams, Billie Jean King and Mia Hamm.

Adding to the Hollywood feel there is a dedicated anthem written and performed by Grammy award-winning singer Brittany Howard (lead singer of Alabama Shakes), with input from rapper Tia P.

Angel City already have the league's biggest sponsorship deal and sold more than 14,000 season tickets well before kicking a ball, putting them on course to be the league's second-best supported club after Portland Thorns.

Former England international Eniola Aluko is sporting director overseeing Coombe and a squad that features Los Angeles-born Christen Press, Canadian Olympic gold medallist Vanessa Gilles and Kiwi veteran Ali Riley.

New teams usually struggle but these two appear well led and with so many teams in transition should do just fine without being likely to win silverware.

Who will? Spirit look well placed to defend their unexpected title having kept most of their roster. Kris Ward, who oversaw 12 unbeaten matches as interim coach is now permanent boss, while breakout star Trinity Rodman has been tied to a lucrative new deal after winning her first USA cap in January. But can they do it over the long haul, without adversity driving them on?

Thorns won the regular season title and Challenge Cup and are the bookies' favourites, but they appear weaker, and not just because Parsons has gone. So too is Lindsay Horan (to Lyon) while Crystal Dunn is pregnant and Becky Sauerbrunn is recuperating from surgery. Japan's Hina Sugita has been hired.

Championship final runners-up Chicago Red Stars and perennial contenders Courage are rebuilding after their enforced coaching changes, while the quality of regular season runners-up OL Reign may depend on who they are lent by parent club Lyon.

In short, unlike the European leagues, the NWSL has returned to being wide open, even without the six-club play-off system.

The season began with the Challenge Cup, which winds up on May 7 soon after the regular league opens on April 29. The championship match is on October 29. Who plays in it is anyone's guess.

Round-up

Returning...Ada Hegerberg

HEGERBERG RETURNS FOR NORWAY

Ada Hegerberg, the inaugural female Ballon d'Or winner, has returned to the Norwegian national team after a five-year self-imposed exile. The 26-year-old Lyon striker, who scored 38 goals in 66 matches before stepping away, quit because she felt the national federation (NFF) did not respect women's football.

She returns after recovering from a serious anterior cruciate ligament injury that kept her out of the sport for 20 months.

The reunion followed months of discussions with former international Lise Klaveness, now NFF president. Hegerberg is now likely to play for Norway at Euro 2022.

BARCELONA CRUISE TO LEAGUE TITLE

Barcelona won their third successive Spanish title in the most satisfying way imaginable, crushing Real Madrid 5-0. That was their 24th win in 24 league matches, wrapping up the league with six games to spare. In those matches they racked up an astonishing goal difference of 136-6. Five Barca players were in double figures on the scoring charts headed by Nigeria's Asisat Oshoala with 19 goals.

Campeones... Barcelona Femeni

VICTORY VICTORIOUS AGAIN

Melbourne Victory retained the A-League Women title, defeating Sydney FC in the grand final 2-1. Amy Jackson and Catherine Zimmerman scored the goals but Victory's star was goalkeeper Casey Dumont with a string of fine saves.

Sydney had retained the regular season title, finishing 11 points ahead of fourth-placed Victory with Melbourne City and Adelaide United making up the play-off quartet.

After nine successive defeats newcomers Wellington Phoenix, who played home games in Wollongong, Australia, due to COVID restrictions in New Zealand, picked up two wins in the last four weeks. This drew them level on points at the bottom with Western Sydney Wanderers.

CITY WIN ANOTHER LEAGUE CUP

Manchester City came from behind to defeat Chelsea 3-1 at a sold-out Plough Lane, and win the English League Cup for the fourth time. Caroline Weir scored twice and Ellen White once after Sam Kerr had given Chelsea a half-time lead.

League Cup winners...Manchester City

EXILED AFGHANISTAN LOSE FIFA RANKING

Afghanistan were dropped from the FIFA world rankings "due to inactivity" said the global governing body. This follows the Taliban, which is against women playing sport, regaining control in Kabul and the subsequent scattering of the Afghan team into exile.

Many of the squad have now begun training in Australia with the support of Melbourne Victory. They hope to persuade FIFA to regard them as the national team as the Afghan federation no longer supports women playing.

Afghanistan made their international debut in 2010 with their world ranking peaking at 108 three years later.

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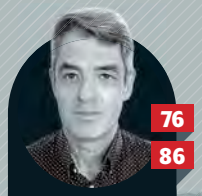
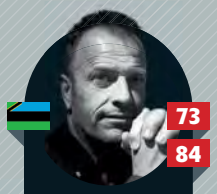


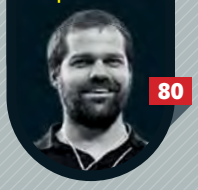
TIM VICKERY
South American World Cup qualifiers
Copa Libertadores
76 86

NICK BIDWELL
European World Cup qualifiers
74



STEVE MENARY
Zanzibar
Oceania World Cup qualifiers
73 84

JAMES NALTON
CONCACAF World Cup qualifiers

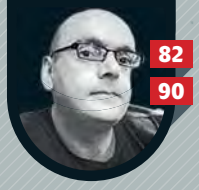


80

MARK GLEESON
African World Cup qualifiers
CAF Champions League

78 88

JOHN DUERDEN
Asian World Cup qualifiers
AFC Champions League



82 90

86

PLUS

Copa Libertadores... group stage preview

NEWS

73 Zanzibar
74 European World Cup qualifiers
76 South American World Cup qualifiers
78 African World Cup qualifiers
80 CONCACAF World Cup qualifiers
82 Asian World Cup qualifiers
84 Oceania World Cup qualifiers
86 Copa Libertadores preview
88 CAF Champions League group stage review
90 AFC Champions League preview

DIARY

92 Global diary

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES

72 ESM XI
94 Internationals
96 Club football

88

Africa...Mamelodi Sundowns shock holders Al Ahly

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

MARCH 2022

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	21
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	18
Alisson (Liverpool)	10
Ederson (Manchester City)	7
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	6
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	4
David Ospina (Napoli)	4
David de Gea (Manchester United)	3
Mike Maignan (Milan)	3
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Walter Benitez (Nice)	1
Bono (Sevilla)	1
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	1
Mark Flekken (Freiburg)	1
Alfred Gomis (Rennes)	1
Samir Handanovic (Internazionale)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Maty Ryan (Real Sociedad)	1
Jose Sa (Wolves)	1
Yann Sommer (B. M'gladbach)	1

DEFENDERS

Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	40
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	25
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	24
Kalidou Koulibaly (Napoli)	19
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	18
Antonio Rudiger (Chelsea)	17
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	12
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	11
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Marquinhos (PSG)	10
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	9
Reece James (Chelsea)	8
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	7
Aymeric Laporte (Manchester City)	7
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	7
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	6
Milan Skriniar (Internazionale)	6
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	5
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	5
Gerard Pique (Barcelona)	5
Marcos Alonso (Chelsea)	4
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea)	4
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	4
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	3
Davide Calabria (Milan)	3
Jules Kounde (Sevilla)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	2
Matthijs de Ligt (Juventus)	2
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	2
Jose Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Pierre Kalulu (Milan)	2
Joel Matip (Liverpool)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	2
Mario Rui (Napoli)	2
Niklas Sule (Bayern Munich)	2
Kieran Tierney (Arsenal)	2
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	2
Dani Alves (Barcelona)	1
Angelino (RB Leipzig)	1
Jerome Boateng (Lyon)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	1
Andreas Christensen (Chelsea)	1
Aaron Cresswell (West Ham United)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Ben Davies (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Merih Demiral (Atalanta)	1
Aritz Elustondo (Real Sociedad)	1
Jose Fonte (Lille)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Thilo Kehrer (PSG)	1
Presnel Kimpembe (PSG)	1
Philipp Lienhart (Freiburg)	1
Lisandro Martinez (Ajax)	1
Chancel Mbemba (Porto)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Thomas Meunier (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jesus Navas (Sevilla)	1
Nicolas Pallois (Nantes)	1
Jose Luis Palomino (Atalanta)	1
Felix Passlack (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Boris Popovic (Cercle Brugge)	1
David Raum (Hoffenheim)	1
Mamadou Sakho (Montpellier)	1
William Saliba (Marseille)	1
Chris Smalling (Roma)	1
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	1
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	1
Lucas Verissimo (Benfica)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	24
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	17
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	16
Pedri (Barcelona)	13
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	10
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	10
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	8
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	8
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	8
Jorginho (Chelsea)	7
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	7
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	5
Idrissa Gueye (PSG)	5
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	5
Kai Havertz (Chelsea)	5
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	5
Marco Verratti (PSG)	5
Fabinho (Liverpool)	4
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	4
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	4
Rodri (Manchester City)	4
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	4
Marcelo Brozovic (Internazionale)	3
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	3
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Benjamin Bourigeaud (Rennes)	2
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	2
Fabian (Napoli)	2
Jordan Henderson (Liverpool)	2
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	2
Declan Rice (West Ham United)	2
Thiago (Liverpool)	2
Sandro Tonali (Milan)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	1
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Philippe Coutinho (Aston Villa)	1
Christian Eriksen (Brentford)	1
Nabil Fekir (Real Betis)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Thorgan Hazard (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Ander Herrera (PSG)	1
Joan Jordan (Sevilla)	1
Orkun Kokcu (Feyenoord)	1

Manuel Locatelli (Juventus)	1
Lovro Majer (Rennes)	1
Joao Moutinho (Wolves)	1
Lucas Ocampos (Sevilla)	1
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Otavio (Porto)	1
Dani Parejo (Villarreal)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Dimitri Payet (Marseille)	1
Paul Pogba (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
Teji Savanier (Montpellier)	1
Andreas Skov Olsen (Club Brugge)	1
Aurelien Tchouameni (Monaco)	1
Youri Tielemans (Leicester City)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Axel Witsel (Borussia Dortmund)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	63
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	42
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	29
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	19
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	17
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	14
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	10
Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (Barcelona)	9
Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United)	7
Sadio Mane (Liverpool)	6
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	6
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	5
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	5
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	4
Sebastien Haller (Ajax)	4
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	3
Lionel Messi (PSG)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Raheem Sterling (Manchester City)	3
Karim Adeyemi (Red Bull Salzburg)	2
Amine Gouiri (Nice)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Romelu Lukaku (Chelsea)	2
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	2
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Giovanni Simeone (Verona)	2
Mehdi Taremi (Porto)	2
Duvan Zapata (Atalanta)	2
Tammy Abraham (Roma)	1
Antony (Ajax)	1
Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco)	1
Steven Berghuis (Ajax)	1
Arnaut Danjuma (Villarreal)	1
Moussa Dembele (Lyon)	1
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	1
Memphis Depay (Barcelona)	1
Moussa Diaby (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Breel Embolo (B. M'gladbach)	1
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	1
Lorenzo Insigne (Napoli)	1
Alexander Isak (Real Sociedad)	1
Rafael Leao (Milan)	1
Alvaro Morata (Juventus)	1
Gerard Moreno (Villarreal)	1
Darwin Nunez (Benfica)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Deniz Undav (Union Saint-Gilloise)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

Zanzibar

STEVE MENARY

Zanzibar give up on FIFA membership

The Tanzanian island is turning to the Confederation of Independent Football Associations

Zanzibar...ahead of the 2017 CECAFA Cup final

The Zanzibar Football Federation has set its sights on joining alternative football association CONIFA after a 17-year battle to join FIFA failed.

The ZFF was founded back in 1926 and predates the union of the island of Zanzibar with Tanganyika in 1964 that formed Tanzania, whose federation joined FIFA the same year.

The autonomous island of a million people became an associate member of the Confederation of African Football and clubs were allowed to enter the qualifiers for the African Champions League and the Confederation Cup.

Zanzibar also fielded a national team in the Council for East and Central Africa Football Association's championship, winning in 1995, but grumbles over the allocation of funds for development drove a bid for footballing independence.

A first bid by Zanzibar for FIFA membership was rejected in 2005.

> "I am fighting to influence my people to fully participate in CONIFA as we qualify with no limit"
>
> Zanzibar Football Federation president Seif Combo

The ZFF kept trying and in 2017 secured full membership of CAF and applied again to the global body. After another rejection, Zanzibar were humiliatingly relegated back to associate membership of CAF a few months later.

The final nail came last year, when CAF amended its statutes so that all new members must now be an independent member of the United Nations. The move at a CAF congress in Rabat brought the African confederation into line with FIFA's own regulations but was widely viewed as part of a wider political ploy.

Moroccan football federation president Fouzi Lekjaa had joined FIFA's council last year and the CAF membership changes also prevented a future bid for membership from the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which Morocco annexed from Spain in 1975.

The CAF move has come as Zanzibar's overseas opportunities began to dry up. The senior CECAFA championship has not been staged since 2019 due to COVID-19, when Zanzibar suffered 1-0 defeats to Tanzania and Kenya but held Sudan 1-1. The CECAFA Under-23 championship was staged last year but Zanzibar were not involved.

Zanzibar's champions KMKM did enter the 2021-22 CAF Champions League, losing 4-0 on aggregate to Libyan side Al Ittihad, but participation in CAF club competitions is usually dependent on the largesse of local sponsors to cover travel costs.

With little help on the horizon, the ZFF agreed to host a CONIFA championship for African representatives unable to join FIFA. Ten teams provisionally entered ranging from Western Sahara and Matabeleland in Zimbabwe to Barotseland from Zambia and the Barawa from Somalia.

The tournament was cancelled twice due to lack of finances and COVID-19 restrictions but CONIFA is hopeful that a smaller four-team event can be staged in southern Africa later this year.

ZFF president Seif Combo says: "There is a possibility [to join FIFA] but we need to have a godfather to fight for us. Actually, I am fighting to influence my people to fully participate in CONIFA as we qualify with no limit."

FIFA membership would have brought millions of dollars of funding for development, whereas CONIFA costs €500 to join. Zanzibar has not paid the fee yet and some doubts remain over the ZFF's desire to join. "I think most of it is a political card rather than actual desire," says one former CONIFA insider.

CONIFA membership might bring some opportunities on the field but would not solve the problem of more funding to help develop the game on Zanzibar.

CECAFA Cup final... Zanzibar lost to Kenya on penalties

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Portugal dodge North Macedonian banana skin

Cristiano Ronaldo and co. overcome Italy's adversaries in European World Cup qualifying, while Robert Lewandowski and Gareth Bale deliver for their countries

No prizes for guessing the identity of the most humbled European nation in World Cup 2022 qualification. Just eight months after claiming the European crown at Wembley, Roberto Mancini's Italy somehow managed to turn wine into water, sensationally falling victim to the minnows of North Macedonia in a 1-0 play-off semi-final defeat in Palermo.

Incredible to think that Italy, four times global champions, have now failed to qualify for the last two World Cups; an unthinkable turn of events for such a soccer superpower.

It will take some time for the Italians to digest the chilling enormity of North Macedonia's 1-0 hold-up in Sicily. For all the *Azzurri*'s total domination on the night – territorial, possession and shots – the hosts' final ball and finishing often were abject and two minutes into stoppage-time, they succumbed to the ultimate sucker punch, Macedonian forward Aleksandar Trajkovski picking up a loose ball and firing in low from outside the box.

"Last July at the European Championship, I had the biggest thrill of my career," declared a visibly stunned Mancini. "Now I'm facing the biggest

Top bins...Gareth Bale scores his free-kick against Austria

International farewell...Burak Yilmaz reacts after missing his penalty

Job done...Bruno Fernandes and Cristiano Ronaldo celebrate against North Macedonia

disappointment. Football is like this. Sometimes the incredible happens.

"The boys don't deserve to be out of the World Cup. What can you say about a game in which we had 40 shots? We conceded at the end and we don't even know why. The players aren't to blame. The responsibility is mine."

North Macedonia executed their game plan to perfection. Happy to sit back and defend in numbers, they were dogged, resilient and impressively disciplined, never losing their shape. Very rarely did they venture forward, but when their moment to strike came, they grabbed it with both hands. "We won Italian style against the Italians," smiled North Macedonia manager Blagoja Milevski. "A goal with two shots on target."

In the other Path C semi-final, Portugal recorded a 3-1 home victory over Turkey. Two goals up at the break (thanks to strikes from Otavio and Diogo Jota), the Portuguese must have thought they were home and dry. However Stefan Kuntz's Turkey are made of strong stuff and, after veteran striker Burak Yilmaz reduced the arrears midway through the second half, the visitors had a gilt-edged chance to restore parity with the clock ticking down, only for Yilmaz to miss from the penalty spot. It would prove to be his last action in a Turkey shirt, announcing his international retirement after the final whistle.

Just to rub salt into Turkish wounds, Portugal put the result beyond doubt in stoppage time, substitute Matheus Nunes slipping the offside trap to finish smartly – his first goal for his country.

Unsurprisingly, North Macedonia looked jaded in the wake of their exertions against Italy and barely troubled novice Diogo Costa in the Portuguese goal

If Portugal rode their luck somewhat at the semi-final stage, the Path C decider versus North Macedonia in Porto was a much less complicated affair for Cristiano Ronaldo and company with Bruno Fernandes scoring in each half as the *Selecao* ran out comfortable 2-0 winners. Unsurprisingly, North Macedonia looked jaded in the wake of their exertions against Italy and barely troubled novice Diogo Costa in the Portuguese goal.

While Poland went straight to the Path B final – handed a walkover following Russia's invasion of Ukraine – in the opposite half of the draw, hosts Sweden needed an extra-time winner from Robin Quaison to see off the Czech Republic in a dour, evenly-matched game in Solna. That 120 minutes of play only producing one goal was not exactly a surprise. Individual quality was few and far between and both sides were missing an ace striker: Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic (suspended) and Czech Republic's Patrik Schick (injured).

Sweden only had themselves to blame for their 2-0 defeat to Poland in the Path B tie-breaker in Chorzow, always a lucky venue for the Poles. The Swedes had more of the ball on the night and more shots, but were simply not clinical enough and were finally undone by two instances of self-destruction. First, they clumsily conceded a penalty, which Poland captain Robert Lewandowski converted shortly after the restart, then a mix-up between Kristoffer Olsson and Marcus Danielson allowed Piotr Zielinski to run through and double the lead.

Wales appear to be the team to beat in Path A, which has been delayed by the war in Ukraine. Inimitable Welsh talisman Gareth Bale was once again the hero of the hour in the 2-1 victory over Austria in the play-off semi-final in Cardiff, netting a brilliant brace. Not bad for a player who had previously only completed 267 La Liga minutes for Real Madrid this term.

Wales will now take on Scotland or Ukraine for that final, all-important Qatar 2022 ticket. The Scotland-Ukraine semi-final fixture is scheduled for June, with the final set to follow the same month.

Full line-ups and results on page 94.

Dispatched...Robert Lewandowski scores from the penalty spot against Sweden

South America

TIM VICKERY

Peru clinch play-off spot

Ricardo Gareca's team head to the inter-confederational play-offs, with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Ecuador safely through to Qatar

With a new format in the 2026 World Cup, South America's qualification system may well have to change. But the one group, everyone-against-everyone marathon format, used between 1998 and this year, has certainly left its mark.

When it arrived, it gave the teams of the continent, for the first time, the type of calendar that European sides have long taken for granted, with regular competitive games and guaranteed income. The effect on the lesser nations was clear: Ecuador qualified for their first World Cup in 2002, and reached the second round four years later; Paraguay enjoyed their best-ever World Cup in 2010, as did Colombia in 2014; Uruguay roared back to the game's top table; and, back in the competition for the first time since 1982, Peru gave eventual champions France a tough game in the group stage four years ago in Russia.

Peru reached that World Cup via the play-offs – and may well do the same thing again this time. The only matter to be decided in the final round was fifth place, the play-off spot. Peru's 2-0 win over Paraguay ensured they grabbed it by finishing a point clear of Colombia.

The vital game here was Peru's 1-0 win in Colombia late in January – exactly the type of game that, in the era before coach Ricardo Gareca, Peru would have lost. Now consistently more than the sum of their parts, they grimly held

Play-off spot secured...Peru celebrate after beating Paraguay

Uruguay's new star ...Facundo Pellistri

Key man...Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez

on before breaking out late in the game to snatch an unlikely victory. This came in the middle of a scarcely credible run of seven games without a goal, which cost Colombia their place in Qatar.

The penultimate round was where Ecuador and Uruguay made sure of their places. Ecuador were already all but mathematically assured of a trip to their fourth World Cup. Like Gareca, Gustavo Alfaro is another Argentine coach who has worked wonders, stepping in at short notice and, consistently putting his faith in youth, constructing a quick and physically strong team who have surpassed expectations. Ecuador have problems in some key positions, but the interesting youth development work taking place in the country marks them out as a team worth watching. They are certainly more than mere altitude specialists – highlighted by their crunch victory away to Chile in November.

The only matter to be decided in the final round was fifth place, the play-off spot. Peru's 2-0 win over Paraguay ensured they grabbed it by finishing a point clear of Colombia

Uruguay raced over the line with four straight wins after a change of coach, with Diego Alonso stepping in after the long reign of Oscar Tabarez. To be fair, the biggest change was probably the quality of opponents – Alonso had a far easier ride than in the last days of Tabarez. The new man made some fascinating tweaks, with the gamble on young attacking midfielder Facundo Pellistri proving an undoubted success. But there are hard decisions to come about the balance of the side and the role of some of the veterans. Centre-back and captain Diego Godin has reached the age when he needs protection. Is he still worth his place? And is it now a case of either Luis Suarez or Edinson Cavani?

In statistical terms, Uruguay were the best South American side in two of the last three World Cups. This time, though, both Brazil and Argentina will travel with real hopes of bringing back the trophy. Often one or the other of the big two falls into a hole in qualification and have to dig themselves out. Not this time. They were streets ahead. Both were unbeaten – Argentina have not lost since the semi-finals of the 2019 Copa America. They still have one more game to be played – the meeting between them that was suspended by Sao Paulo health officials in September, which FIFA has ordered to go ahead – though it is not clear where or when.

Argentina have housed Lionel Messi in the best collective structure he has ever enjoyed with his country. The sweet midfield circuit of passing means that he is being brought into the game closer to the opposing goal, where he can do some real damage. Elsewhere, the emergence of centre-back Cristian Romero and – especially – goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez has stiffened up the defence.

Brazil, meanwhile, rarely even look like conceding a goal, and in the last few months a range of new attacking talents – Antony, Gabriel Martinelli, Rodrygo, Raphinha, Vinicius Junior – have come through to take some of the burden off Neymar. They breezed their way through qualifying, and probably had the better of a goalless draw away to Argentina.

The test, though, will come against European opposition – where both Brazil and Argentina have met their downfall in every World Cup since 2002. With the Nations League – and the pandemic – there has been almost no space for Europe v South America friendlies since Russia 2018. As the clock ticks down towards Qatar, all of this just adds to the anticipation.

Full table and results on pages 94-95.

Going to Qatar...Ecuador forward Michael Estrada serenades the fans

Africa

MARK GLEESON

AFCON final repeats itself

Senegal overcome Egypt on penalties once again to secure their place in Qatar alongside Morocco, Cameroon, Ghana and Tunisia

Few, if any, World Cup qualifying campaigns have concluded as dramatically as the five African play-offs that saw Cameroon, Ghana, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia book their berths as the continent's representatives at the Qatar World Cup.

Cameroon snatched success away from Algeria with virtually the last kick of the match, while Sadio Mane reprised his penalty-kick heroics as his Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah skied his effort in yet another shootout between Senegal and Egypt.

Ghana won unexpectedly thanks to a goalkeeping howler, while Tunisia had a bizarre own goal to thank for their qualification.

Morocco proved the only side to produce an emphatic victory over the two legs, but even then their progress was dogged by controversy over player selection.

Karl Toko Ekambi was Cameroon's hero, sweeping the ball home deep in stoppage-time at the end of extra-time to seal a 2-1 victory over Algeria in Blida in the second leg of their tie. The drama of the goal was heightened by the fact that the Indomitable Lions looked to have lost any chance of an eighth World Cup finals appearance – an African record – when they lost 1-0 at home in the first leg.

Algeria deservedly won in Douala thanks to an Islam Slimani first-half header, seemingly making up for their desperately disappointing performance in the same stadium in January, when their defence of their Africa Cup of Nations title went horribly wrong.

They were all set for further redemption at home in the return leg, but quickly ceded their advantage when goalkeeper Rais M'Bolhi dropped the ball at a corner and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting snapped up the opportunity to equalise on aggregate.

It stayed that way until the 118th minute when Algeria retook the aggregate lead with sub Ahmed Touba's header from a corner.

Yet there was still time left for Cameroon to throw everything forward in a dramatic finale, snatching the tie on away goals with their fairy-tale winner.

Away goals also did it for Ghana who were held goalless in Kumasi by Nigeria in the first leg, but went ahead away after ten minutes in Abuja. Thomas Partey's rasping shot slipped under Nigeria keeper Francis Uzoho to hand the Black Stars a sudden – and surprise – advantage. Nigeria equalised through William Troost-Ekong's penalty soon after, but still needed one more goal. Even with Victor Osimhen and Emmanuel Dennis back in attack, they proved devoid of ideas and went out with a whimper.

Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy saved from Mostafa Mohamed, allowing Mane to grab glory again as he thrashed his kick home in a repeat of the AFCON final

Tunisia will be ever thankful to Moussa Sissako, the Paris-born

Rivals collide... Senegal winger Sadio Mane dribbles past Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah

Key clash... Algeria's Islam Slimani clashes with Cameroon defender Michael Ngadeu-Ngadjui

21-year-old central defender from Standard Liege, playing only his fourth international for Mali in the first leg in Bamako. He made a horrible error by hitting a no-look back pass and catching goalkeeper Ibrahim Mounkoro unawares to hand the Tunisians a gift of a goal away from home.

To make matters worse, Sissako was red-carded four minutes later for a trip on Seifeddine Jaziri, leaving Mali down to ten men for most of the match.

Yet, Mali were evenly matched and Tunisia were forced to hold on for a 0-0 draw at home in the return with another of their trademark defensive displays.

Senegal lost 1-0 away in Cairo in the first leg of their play-off when Salah's fourth-minute effort hit the crossbar and then came off the knee of Saliou Ciss. But the new African champions always looked the stronger of the two teams and had their hosts on the back foot, without realising any profit.

But just three minutes into the return leg at their new stadium in Dakar, striker Boulaye Dia stabbed home the aggregate equaliser – via a deflection off Hamdi Fathi – setting off another rear-guard action by the Egyptians.

The game progressed through extra time and into the shootout. Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly missed, then Salah blazed his effort into the night sky, with the next two penalties also wasted. At 2-1 up, Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy saved from Mostafa Mohamed, allowing Mane to grab glory again as he thrashed his kick home in a repeat of the AFCON final.

Morocco overcame the Democratic Republic of Congo 5-2 on aggregate, falling behind early in the first leg but recovering for a 1-1 draw when substitute Tarik Tissoudali scored. He was among the goalscorers again in the second leg, with Azzedine Ounahi netting twice in Casablanca and Achraf Hakimi adding the fourth. Striker Ben Malango netted a consolation for the visitors in the 77th minute.

Morocco coach Vahid Halilhodzic will now, however, have to deal with the Hakim Ziyech issue after he left both the Chelsea winger and Ajax full-back Noussair Mazraoui out of the squad for January's Cup of Nations. He then surprisingly recalled them for the World Cup play-offs only for the pair to give him short shrift.

But it is unlikely to be the end of the matter, especially as the pair can greatly enhance Morocco's prospects in Qatar.

Full line-ups and results on page 94.

Finals spot secured... Kwasi Okyere Wriedt celebrates Ghana's aggregate victory against Nigeria

Comfortable... Achraf Hakimi after scoring v DR Congo

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Canada top CONCACAF World Cup qualifying

Canucks seal qualification in style to reach first World Cup in 36 years

Goal machine... Cyle Larin (left) celebrates another goal for Canada

Canada, Mexico, and the United States will be present in Qatar later this year after securing places in the top three of CONCACAF World Cup qualifying, but as the all-important third round came to an end, perhaps only Canada will be pleased with their overall performance after reaching their first men's World Cup since 1986.

Below them in the table, a late surge from Costa Rica saw them book a place in June's inter-confederational play-off where they will face Oceania representatives New Zealand. *Los Ticos,* coached by Colombian Luis Fernando Suarez, ended the third round as the region's form team.

But the headlines belong to Canada, who began this qualifying cycle as the seventh best team in CONCACAF according to the FIFA rankings, and ended it top of the qualifying table.

They were the only team to book their World Cup place with a game to spare, and their only defeats in 20 games across all three rounds came with qualification all but assured.

The five top-ranked sides in the region at the start of qualifying – Mexico, the United States, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras – got a bye to the third round (or the "octagonal", as it's known), which kicked off in September 2021.

But Canada's road to Qatar began back in March 2021 with first round games against Bermuda, the Cayman

Islands, Aruba and Suriname. It was a procession for John Herdman's side as they won all four games, scoring 27 goals and conceding just once. In the second round play-off, they breezed past Haiti with a 4-0 aggregate win.

In the past, the Canadians have struggled with the transition from playing the confederation's minnows, to facing regional heavyweights USA and Mexico at the business end of qualifying. But memorable home wins at home against both those sides, along with 1-1 draws in Nashville and Mexico City, show how effectively Herdman and his players met that challenge.

Their first defeat didn't arrive until March, in Costa Rica, but they followed that up with a convincing 4-0 win against Jamaica in Toronto, mathematically securing qualification in front of a jubilant home crowd.

Much of the focus had been on young stars Alphonso Davies, Jonathan David and Tajon Buchanan, but it was striker Cyle Larin, scoring goals in big games, who was arguably Canada's most important player.

Larin led goalscoring in the octagonal with six, taking his overall tally to 13 across the three rounds, overtaking Dwayne De Rosario to become the all-time top goalscorer for Canada's men's team in the process. Across the rest of the world, only Ali Mabkhout of the United Arab Emirates scored more (14) times on the road to Qatar.

Though United States and Mexico had to wait until the final game to confirm qualification, in truth, they were all but through by that time.

Despite the United States' loss to Costa Rica in their last match, Gregg Berhalter's men still qualified automatically in third, returning to the global stage after failing to qualify in 2018.

Back on the big stage...yet USA must improve for Qatar

The Costa Ricans celebrated their victory, but they will have to get past New Zealand in the inter-confederational play-off to reach their third consecutive World Cup. Given they only won once in their first seven games, finishing fourth was itself a big achievement. They subsequently won six of their last seven, drawing the other in Mexico, to pip Panama to the play-off place. Their win in the final game saw them finish level on points with the US, but behind them on goal difference.

The headlines belong to Canada, who began this qualifying cycle as the seventh best team in CONCACAF, according to the FIFA rankings, and ended it top of the qualifying table

It was an unconvincing campaign for Mexico, especially in attack, but they still finished level on points with Canada and will be heading for their eighth consecutive World Cup. Unlike the Canadians, Gerardo Martino's side struggled to find star quality. But their defence, plus midfielder Edson Alvarez, contributed to a solid if unspectacular qualification record.

Elsewhere, there was disappointment for Jamaica who recruited well, calling up the likes of Ravel Morrison, Andre Gray and Michail Antonio, but only won two games, showing that finding eligible players is only part of the battle.

These will be the last qualifiers Canada, Mexico and the United States play for some time, given they are joint hosts of the 2026 tournament. For the rest, that tournament presents a golden opportunity to feature on the global stage – many for the first time.

As for Qatar, Mexico and USA have plenty to improve upon between now and the tournament in November, while Canada look set to be one of the most exciting and intriguing teams at the finals.

Full table and results on page 94.

Play-offs bound... Costa Rica players celebrate after beating USA

Key man...Mexico midfielder Edson Alvarez

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Review

Usual suspects advance from Asian region

Iran, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Japan head to Qatar, with Australia and the United Arab Emirates facing a tricky play-off route

Talisman... Son Heung-min topped the scoring charts for South Korea

Asia looked at the controversial and dramatic end to Africa's World Cup qualifiers in wonder. The road to Qatar that ran through the world's biggest continent was also the longest as it started back in June 2019. The ending was, however, dull and predictable – a carbon copy of the last time around with Iran, South Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia as the four automatic qualifiers.

The quartet all made it with at least a game to spare, but there will be drama to come in the June play-offs. The two third-placed teams, United Arab Emirates and Australia, meet in Doha, with the winner taking on South American representatives Peru a week later.

In Group A, Iran and South Korea had the two automatic spots sewn up from the start, finishing a massive 13 and 11 points respectively ahead of the UAE.

Jubilant...Japan celebrate their victory over Australia

The Koreans can now look forward to a tenth successive appearance on the global stage, a streak bettered only by Brazil, Germany, Argentina and Spain. They started slowly with uninspiring performances at home against Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. There were even suggestions that coach Paulo Bento, in place since 2018, may be in for the chop.

But as the games came, matters improved. Son Heung-min looked less burdened by a nation's expectations. After a decent 1-1 draw in Iran, there were five wins in a row with no goals conceded. Their best performance came in the penultimate game, a 2-0 win over Iran in front of more than 64,000 spectators in Seoul.

Korea would have topped the group had they not contrived to lose their final game 1-0 in Dubai to the United Arab Emirates, despite having 77 per cent of possession and 16 corners. It may prove to be a blessing in disguise though, showing the work that still needs to be done at both ends of the pitch.

Iran, for the third time in succession, topped their group. The one negative was the defeat to Korea, a result that ended a seven-game unbeaten streak against the East Asians and a growing feeling that they had a hold over their rivals. By the time of the loss in Seoul, Iran, who earlier swapped Marc Wilmots for Dragan Skocic in the dugout, were already through. Team Melli were, however, rarely in danger of not qualifying with the likes of Mehdi Taremi and Sardar Azmoun in attack. That is why supporters, however, are a little concerned: when the real tests came against the Koreans, Iran took just one solitary point.

Deadly duo...Iran's front two Sardar Azmoun (L) and Mehdi Taremi hit 17 goals combined in qualifying

UAE may have finished third but their performances were very disappointing and cost Bert van Marwijk his job with two games remaining. Iraq, Syria and Lebanon can be determined and hard to beat but won just one game each out of their ten qualifiers. No surprise then that Iran and South Korea will feel the need for some challenging friendly games before Qatar.

> **There will be drama to come in the June play-offs. The two third-placed teams, United Arab Emirates and Australia, meet in Doha, with the winner taking on South American representatives Peru a week later**

Group B was better. Saudi Arabia finished first, a fine performance and a testament to the improvements head coach Herve Renard has made since taking over in 2019. With an entirely domestic-based squad, the Green Falcons were deserved winners, playing with increasing intensity and confidence. The likes of Salem Al Dawsari and Salman Al Faraj were standouts going forward, with the defence solid for the most part. A fine home victory against Japan showed the team's quality and a fighting 0-0 draw on a wet Sydney night showed the necessary fighting spirit.

For a while Japan were fighting with Australia for second spot but pulled away in the second half of the third round stage. The Samurai Blue bounced back well from a shock 1-0 home defeat to Oman in the opening match, but there are concerns that the team did not score enough goals – just 12 in the ten games – given the talent available. Coach Hajime Moriyasu came under criticism for his overly cautious tactics and not getting the best out of a talented group of players.

In the end, it was all clinched with a deserved 2-0 win in Australia with Kaoru Mitoma coming off the bench to make the difference. It condemned the Socceroos, looking for a fifth successive World Cup appearance, to third and the play-offs. In the end, Australia, shorn of the Euro-based stars they boasted not long ago, finished just one point above an improved and organised Oman who managed 14 - a more than respectable showing.

The less said about China, with just six points, the better. Their campaign was a disaster and while Vietnam were bottom, they at least had the excuse of appearing at this stage for the first time.

Full tables and results on page 94.

Disappointing... the Australians had expected automatic qualification to Qatar

Oceania

STEVE MENARY

New Zealand cruise through qualifying

Kiwis set up date with Costa Rica in the inter-confederational play-offs, but the Qatar-based qualifying tournament is overshadowed by COVID

New Zealand predictably emerged from the Oceania qualifiers to secure an inter-confederational play-off with Costa Rica for a place at the 2022 World Cup finals, but the relocated tournament proved unsatisfactory.

With none of the Oceania Football Confederation's 11 full members able to host the tournament due to COVID-19 restrictions, the qualifiers were relocated to Qatar. But the virus and a trip halfway round the world proved major obstacles.

American Samoa and Samoa ruled out travelling on healthcare grounds and Tonga pulled out after the eruption of the Hunga volcano on the islands in January. Vanuatu made the 13,000-mile trip but a 3-0 defeat to Fiji in a warm-up friendly at the Qatar University ground proved their only action.

Set-piece specialists...New Zealand open the scoring in the final in Doha

Papua New Guinea striker...Tommy Lemmy scored twice in Doha

Rising star...Solomon Islands' Raphael Lea'i in action against New Zealand

Subsequent tests proved that the majority of the Vanuatu team had the virus. Unable to get replacement players to Doha for their first game with the Solomon Islands on March 17, Vanuatu withdrew and went home.

"Under the Ministry of Public Health regulations for the State of Qatar Healthcare Protocol, the positive cases must isolate for a minimum period of seven days," said the Vanuatu Football Federation. "The VFF Executive Committee is seeking the assistance of the OFC and FIFA if there is the possibility to waive the disciplinary sanctions regarding the withdrawal of the team."

The Cook Islands did at least play their first competitive match in seven years and were far from disgraced in losing 2-0 to a strong Solomon Islands team. Days later however, Alan Taylor's team were also bushwhacked by the virus, and their game with Tahiti was also cancelled.

Group A's results were therefore annulled and reduced to a single game. A hat-trick from 18-year-old Henderson Eels striker Raphael Lea'i secured a 3-1 win for the Solomon Islands over Tahiti and the prize of avoiding the Kiwis in the semi-final, while for the Tahitians there was the unusual situation of advancing to the semis with zero points.

All of the games in Group B were contested, and Fiji will have departed feeling they could have reached the semi-finals had they been given an easier draw and a place in Group A.

After Roy Krishna had broken their scoring record in a friendly win over Vanuatu, they began the group with a 2-1 victory over New Caledonia. Although it was only the first game, it was effectively a knockout match, given that nobody expected to get any points off New Zealand.

Having said that, Papua New Guinea did run the Kiwis close in their first game, losing to a single goal from Wellington Phoenix striker Ben Waine on his international debut. New Zealand then trounced Fiji 4-0 and New Caledonia 7-1, leaving PNG to scrap it out with Fiji for the final semi-final spot on matchday three.

Papua New Guinea were well prepared by Brazilian coach Marcos Gusmao, and they took the other semi-final spot with a 2-1 win. Tommy Semmy, who plays club football in the Victoria league in Australia, scored the decisive goal and his second in consecutive games.

In the semis they met the Solomon Islands and, when defender Alwin Komolong scored after 24 minutes, a place in the final – Gusmao's pre-tournament target – looked possible.

Yet the Solomons, who had been on a pre-tournament training camp in Brisbane and put in good displays against state sides, rallied and scored three times in reply, eventually winning 3-2, with Ati Kepo grabbing an 88th-minute consolation goal for PNG. "We could have achieved better results if it weren't for the players' injuries," said a rueful Gusmao afterwards.

> **For the Tahitians there was the unusual situation of advancing to the semi-finals with zero points**

The Solomons' Spanish head coach Felipe Vega-Arango had similar regrets ahead of the final with New Zealand at Qatar's Grand Hamad Stadium, as three of his players fell victim to positive COVID-19 tests.

Predictably their opponents were New Zealand, who had beaten a negative Tahitian side 1-0 thanks to a Liberato Cacace goal to advance to the final. The Solomons proved more positive opponents – and easier to exploit at set-pieces. Lacking the Kiwis' height, the Solomon Islands conceded twice before half-time through goals from Portland Timbers centre-back Bill Tuiloma and Newcastle United striker Chris Wood.

Joe Bell added a third after the break but the Solomons nearly pulled a goal back through teenage prodigy Raphael Lea'i, who beat Tommy Smith only to see his shot saved by Stefan Marinovic. Their moment was gone and the Kiwis eventually romped home 5-0.

The final had kicked off at 6am New Zealand time and two hours earlier in the Solomons, which underlined that the qualifiers were more about fulfilling a requirement than engaging supporters back home.

For those teams that escaped COVID-19, the tournament provided valuable game time but is unlikely to be repeated in this format. The Kiwis were always likely to win given the depth of their playing resources, and the real target for the islanders was next year's Pacific Games.

Reaching the final in Qatar will give Vega-Arango belief that as hosts, his Solomon Islands side can continue to progress and clinch gold as the Kiwis retain an interest in the World Cup.

Full tables and results on page 95.

South America

TIM VICKERY

Copa Libertadores group stage begins

Brazil's big three are the teams to beat in this year's competition

Brazilian champions... Atletico Mineiro

Between them, Brazil and Argentina provide almost half the field in the group phase of this year's Copa Libertadores once again. Since the competition was extended to cover the calendar year in 2017 it has been very hard for the rest of South America to get a look in. And since that controversial River Plate-Boca Juniors final in 2018, it has been a tale of Brazilian domination.

Brazil's big three – Palmeiras, the winners of the last two Libertadores titles, 2019 champions Flamengo and domestic double winners Atletico Mineiro – are clearly the teams to beat. Last year the three of them played a total of 38 Libertadores matches, and only lost two. One was a meaningless group game when Palmeiras fielded a weakened side, and the other was the final when Palmeiras edged past Flamengo.

Can they be stopped this year? Still under Abel Ferreira, Palmeiras would seem to have been drawn into one of the easier groups, and the same applies to Flamengo – good news for their new coach Paulo Sousa as he tries

River Plate boss... Marcelo Gallardo

Boca's key man... Sebastian Villa

Favourites... Flamengo's Willian Arao and Palmeiras' Deyverson clash in the 2021 Copa Libertadores final

to introduce a new style with a back three.

The task of Atletico Mineiro – with new coach Antonio Mohamed finding his feet – looks tougher. Their group leaves much less margin for error – especially because there is the drama of two local derbies against America, who fought their way through two penalty shootouts in the qualifying rounds in their first-ever Libertadores campaign.

There are two more Brazilian debutants, reflecting the emergence of new forces, and they are thrown into the deep end of the battles with Argentina that may well define this year's competition. Red Bull Bragantino are in with three former champions, two of them from Argentina. The young Velez Sarsfield side have made an inconsistent start to the year, but have talent, while Estudiantes have shown themselves to be rugged and resilient by fighting their way through the qualifying rounds.

Fortaleza, meanwhile, have three glamorous opponents for their first Libertadores adventure – topped, of course, by River Plate, who have invested heavily to retain coach Marcelo Gallardo. After that 2018 triumph, River have fallen to heavyweight Brazilian opposition at an earlier stage every year. Perhaps the key question in this year's competition is how to defend against the array of attacking talent that the big Brazilian clubs can now unleash against them. River's answer will be to try to take the initiative, and impose their expansive attacking game on their opponents.

Boca Juniors, buoyed by their league win at rivals River in mid-March, have a different method: aggressive defence, combined with the thrust of Colombian winger Sebastian Villa on the counter attack. This will be tested early. Boca are in the same group as Brazilian giants Corinthians, whose experienced squad may regard the Libertadores as more accessible than the marathon of the domestic league.

There is one more Brazilian representative, cup specialists and reigning Sudamericana champions Athletico Paranaense. Their group is made intriguing by the presence of Bolivian altitude specialists The Strongest. If the Bolivians pick up maximum home points, there could be only one slot available for Athletico or Libertad of Paraguay.

With their consistent ability to punch above their weight, the Paraguayans can never be discounted – and there will be great excitement in Asuncion at the two group meetings of the old rivals Olimpia and Cerro Porteno.

Penarol of Uruguay looked to have groomed a highly promising side last year, but player sales have predictably ravaged their ranks – a process accelerated by the rise of Major League Soccer, which plucked away the jewel in the crown, playmaker Facundo Torres.

The country that best seems to have dealt with this new reality is, surprisingly, Ecuador, where domestic champions Independiente del Valle have been in the forefront of splendid youth development. Their style might be too expansive for the Libertadores – this was certainly a problem last year – but they are always interesting to watch. And Emelec of Guayaquil will back their chances of reaching the knockout rounds.

Last year Palmeiras, Flamengo and Atletico Mineiro played a total of 38 Libertadores matches, and only lost two

The biggest disappointment in recent times has been Colombia. Atletico Nacional won the title in 2016, the last year the Libertadores was crammed into the first half of the year. Subsequently only one Colombian side has made it out of the group phase – and with two teams falling in the qualifying rounds, there are only two representatives left. Tolima have been the best Colombian team of late, but both they and Deportivo Cali have been drawn in tricky groups.

Maybe they will come good this year. Or perhaps the likes of Nacional of Uruguay, or Colon or Talleres of Argentina can spring a shock. The Libertadores can be unpredictable. No doubt, though, that the big Brazilians are the favourites, with River Plate and Boca Juniors leading the chasing pack.

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Palmeiras
- Emelec
- Deportivo Tachira
- Independiente Petrolero

GROUP B
- Athletico Paranaense
- Libertad
- Caracas
- The Strongest

GROUP C
- Nacional
- Velez Sarsfield
- Red Bull Bragantino
- Estudiantes

GROUP D
- Atletico Mineiro
- Independiente del Valle
- Tolima
- America Mineiro

GROUP E
- Boca Juniors
- Corinthians
- Deportivo Cali
- Always Ready

GROUP F
- River Plate
- Colo Colo
- Alianza Lima
- Fortaleza

GROUP G
- Penarol
- Cerro Porteno
- Colon
- Olimpia

GROUP H
- Flamengo
- Universidad Catolica
- Sporting Cristal
- Talleres

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Mamelodi Sundowns set new standards

South African side reach knockout stages with record points haul as they bid to end their CAF Champions League hoodoo

Mamelodi Sundowns set a new benchmark for the group phase of the African Champions League with a record points haul, but must now get rid of their Manchester City-esque penchant for flattering to deceive ahead of the knockout phase of the competition.

The South African club, who are owned by Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe, became the first team since the group competition started in 1997 to amass 16 points from their six matches – five wins and one draw.

Previously Esperance from Tunisia had won five but lost one in 1999 and 2013, but the Pretoria outfit went one better in an impressive display of efficiency that included beating the holders Al Ahly both home and away.

But the Egyptian giants still qualified in second place from Group A and remain on course to become the first team to win Africa's top club prize three years in a row.

The Cairo club are coached by the South African Pitso Mosimane, who made his name at Sundowns but had to suffer the humiliation of first losing at home and then, a fortnight later, away to his former employers, with whom he now has an antagonistic relationship.

Record breakers... Mamelodi Sundowns midfielder Thapelo Morena celebrates against Sudan's Al Hilal Omdurman

Top of the group... fans of Wydad watch their team defeat Zamalek of Egypt in Casablanca

Dejected...Al Ahly coach Pitso Mosimane lost twice against his former club Sundowns

Ahly, however, were feeling the effects of an exhausting schedule, stretching all the way back to December when nine of their players went off to compete in the Arab Cup. A similar number then went straight onto the Africa Cup of Nations finals, were rushed back to compete in the Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi, and then into the Champions League group phase and catch-up matches in their domestic programme.

Ahly looked utterly exhausted when Sundowns beat them 1-0 home and away but they still finished runners-up, seeing off Al Hilal Omdurman of Sudan in their last group match to make sure of their progress to the last eight.

Esperance, Raja and their Casablanca neighbours Wydad were the other group winners and will get home advantage in the quarter-finals.

Raja and Wydad won five and lost one in their respective groups to also set new record for themselves, while Esperance ended unbeaten in Group C with four victories and two stalemates.

It makes for a formidable field now for the knockout stages where Chabab Belouizdad and Entente Setif of Algeria and Angola's Petro Atletico are also through.

Seven of the eight quarter-final places were decided before the final matchday at the start of April, with holders Al Ahly the last to claim their place. Needing only a home draw, they struggled through the home game against Al Hilal before substitute Hussein El Shahat scored 16 minutes from time for a respectable finish.

Six of the eight contenders for this season's Champions League title come from North Africa, again emphasising the dominance of clubs from the Arabic-speaking belt at the top of the continent and giving this season's competition an air of predictability.

But now, all bets are off as the competition heads into the knockout phase, culminating in the final in late May at a venue yet to be decided by Confederation of African Football.

The South African Football Association are one of the bidders for the right to stage the game, banking on Sundowns going all the way and seeking to give them some advantage should they make the decider.

But for all of their proficiency in the group phase, they have been eliminated in the last two quarter-finals and the semi-final in 2019, after famously thrashing Al Ahly 5-0 at home in the last eight.

> The South African club became the first team since the group competition started in 1997 to amass 16 points from their six matches

In the African Confederation Cup, there are five teams from North African countries advancing to the quarter-finals and three from countries south of the Sahara – Orlando Pirates of South Africa, TP Mazembe of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania's Simba.

Three-time winners CS Sfaxien from Tunisia did not make it through and there was a dose of reality for Royal Leopard, the police team from tiny Eswatini. After the excitement of eliminating last season's runners-up JS Kabylie, they lost all six of their group matches and were forced to host their "home" games in neighbouring South Africa because there were no stadia suitable for use in the small kingdom.

There were no teams as dominant in the group phase as there were in the Champions League and no unbeaten sides either in the continent's second competition.

THE FINAL STANDINGS

GROUP A

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Mamelodi Sundowns	6	5	1	0	+8	16
2	Al Ahly	6	3	1	2	+2	10
3	Al Hilal Omdurman	6	1	1	4	-4	4
4	Al Merrikh	6	1	1	4	-6	4

GROUP B

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Raja	6	5	0	1	+5	15
2	ES Setif	6	3	0	3	+1	9
3	AmaZulu	6	2	1	3	-3	7
4	Horoya	6	1	1	4	-3	4

GROUP C

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Esperance	6	4	2	0	+10	14
2	CR Belouizdad	6	3	2	1	+5	11
3	Etoile du Sahel	6	1	3	2	-3	6
4	Jwaneng Galaxy	6	0	1	5	-12	1

GROUP D

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Wydad	6	5	0	1	+10	15
2	Petro de Luanda	6	3	2	1	+1	11
3	Zamalek	6	0	4	2	-3	4
4	Sagrada Esperanca	6	0	2	4	-8	2

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Preview

Champions League kick-off

The 2022 edition of Asia's elite club competition will be the last of its kind

The 2022 AFC Champions League kicks off in April but it will mark the end of an era. This is not because it will feature 40 teams; that expansion came into play last year. It is not because there are clubs from nations such as India, the Philippines and Tajikistan; these were already there. It is because it will be the last edition that runs from spring to autumn. The next edition will start in September 2023 and finish the following May.

The change to align with the European calendar has long been thought about with the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) saying that it will "enable Asia's top clubs to benefit from more synchronised transfer windows, improved opportunities to sign quality players and coaches with respect to worldwide leagues' seasons, and a more even distribution of club matches annually to maintain a balance with national team matches."

It is one of the biggest shake-ups since 2003, when the Champions League succeeded the old Asian Club Championship. That first edition saw Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates defeat BEC Tero Sasana of Thailand. Such a match-up is unlikely this time. Saudi Arabia and Qatar look to have the strongest candidates from the western zone (the tournament is divided into two geographic zones until the final) with the usual suspects of South Korea and Japan from the east.

Chinese clubs are basically out of the running – literally in some cases. The eastern group stage takes place in April, just as the Chinese Super League is due to start a new season. With all the groups being held in centralised venues in Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, Changchun Yatai pulled out amid struggles to afford to send the team overseas for two weeks of games. China's other three representatives Shandong Taishan, Guangzhou FC – champions in 2013 and 2015 – and Shanghai Port are set to send second-string squads.

That gives clubs from Southeast Asia, such as Johor Darul Ta'zim of Malaysia and Thailand's BG Pathum United, a great chance to build on recent continental appearances and get to the latter stages. After years of disappointing performances, Australia need Sydney FC and Melbourne City to fly the flag for the A-League. It is likely however that the team to emerge from the east to go all the way to the final, which will take place next February (partly due to the World Cup, partly due to the global pandemic and partly because of the transition to the new schedule), will come from either Japan or South Korea.

> It is one of the biggest shake-ups since 2003, when the Champions League succeeded the old Asian Club Championship

Both have the full contingent of

"No.1 in Asia"... Vissel Kobe celebrate overcoming Australia's Melbourne Victory in the play-offs

Holders...Saudi Arabian giants Al Hilal celebrate with the 2021 trophy

four teams. Vissel Kobe's official slogan is "No.1 in Asia". The Kansai club may never have even won the Japanese title but with Andres Iniesta, anything is possible. The Spaniard helped them squeeze past Melbourne Victory 4-3 in the play-offs. Kawasaki Frontale have won four of the last five J.League titles but have underachieved in Asia. There is a determination in the club just south of Tokyo that this has to change. In South Korea, the most successful nation in the competition's history with 12 titles, Ulsan Hyundai and Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors are the main contenders. Both have won two continental championships apiece in the past 16 years and both have what it takes to make it three.

Flying the A-League flag...Sydney FC striker Adam Le Fondre

Two wins from Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the past three years have put West Asia back on the map after years of eastern dominance. The star-studded powerhouse, with Matheus Pereira, Moussa Marega and Odion Ighalo, have plenty of firepower and, with their group taking place in their home city of Riyadh, are the favourites. In fact all five west zone groups will be hosted in Saudi Arabia, giving the country's four teams a real boost.

Iran's chances have been hit by January's expulsion of the twin Tehran titans Persepolis and Esteghlal for, among other things, having the same owner. It means that if the team that reaches the final from the west is not from Saudi Arabia then Qatar is the likeliest bet. Under former coach Xavi, Al Sadd were dominant at home but didn't make an impact in the Champions League. That could change, and Al Duhail will also be looking to go far.

While the tournament is looking a little predictable at the moment, the AFC won't care about that. As the competition kicks off in spring for the last time, all they want is a COVID-free continental experience after finding the 2020 and 2021 tournaments real headaches to organise. Excitement and entertainment are a bonus.

J.League champions... Kawasaki Frontale players watch on as they exit last year's competition on penalties

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Al Hilal
- Al Rayyan
- Istiklol
- Sharjah

GROUP B
- Al Jazira
- Al Shabab
- Mumbai City
- Al Quwa Al Jawiya

GROUP C
- Foolad
- Shabab Al Ahli
- Ahal
- Al Gharafa

GROUP D
- Al Duhail
- Sepahan
- Pakhtakor
- Al Taawoun

GROUP E
- Al Sadd
- Al Faisaly
- Al Wehdat
- Nasaf Qarshi

GROUP F
- Shandong Taishan
- Urawa Red Diamonds
- Lion City Sailors
- Daegu FC

GROUP G
- BG Pathum United
- Jeonnam Dragons
- United City
- Melbourne City

GROUP H
- Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
- Yokohama F. Marinos
- Hoang Anh Gia Lai
- Sydney FC

GROUP I
- Kawasaki Frontale
- Guangzhou FC
- Johor Darul Ta'zim
- Ulsan Hyundai

GROUP J
- Shanghai Port
- Chiangrai United
- Kitchee
- Vissel Kobe

APRIL 15-MAY 14

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

(All kick-off times, if stated, are BST)

Friday April 15

ENGLAND: Good Friday sees a full set of Football League fixtures.

Saturday April 16

ENGLAND: Liverpool face Manchester City at Wembley in the first FA Cup semi-final.
SPAIN: Sevilla host Real Madrid in a potential title decider at the top of the table La Liga.
FRANCE: Lille take on Lens in Ligue 1, just a few months on from the pitch invasion that marred their last meeting. Elsewhere, Paris Saint-Germain face arch-rivals Marseille.
PORTUGAL: Sporting play local rivals Benfica in the Lisbon derby.
SCOTLAND: It's an Edinburgh derby in the first Scottish FA Cup semi-final, with Hearts going head-to-head with Hibernian.

Sunday April 17

GERMANY: Bayer Leverkusen host RB Leipzig in the race for a top-four finish in the Bundesliga.
NETHERLANDS: PSV take on Ajax in the Dutch Cup final.
ENGLAND: The second FA Cup semi-final takes place between Chelsea and Crystal Palace.
SCOTLAND: Celtic face Old Firm rivals Rangers in the second Scottish FA Cup semi-final.

Monday April 18

BELGIUM: Gent play Anderlecht in the Belgian Cup final.

Tuesday April 19

ITALY: The second leg of the Italian Cup semi-final takes place between Internazionale and Milan. The first leg finished in a 0-0 draw.
ENGLAND: Liverpool take on Manchester United at Anfield.

Wednesday April 20

ITALY: Juventus host Fiorentina in the second leg of the Italian Cup semi-final, with a 1-0 advantage from the first game.
PORTUGAL: The Portuguese Cup semi-final second legs see Porto play Sporting after a 2-1 victory in the first leg, while Tondela seek to defend a 3-0 lead against Mafra.
ENGLAND: Chelsea face Arsenal at Stamford Bridge in a huge Premier League London derby.

Thursday April 21

ENGLAND: Lowly Burnley host Southampton in another midweek Premier League game.

Friday April 22

GERMANY: *Der Klassiker* between Bayern Munich and Dortmund kicks off at the Allianz Arena.
EUROPE: The semi-finals of the UEFA Youth League takes place, with Atletico Madrid v Red Bull Salzburg and Juventus v TBC.

Saturday April 23

SPAIN: Real Betis face Valencia at the Stadio de la Cartuja in Seville.
ENGLAND: In an early kick-off, Arsenal host Manchester United.
WOMEN'S: It's the first leg of the Champions League semi-final with Barcelona, Wolfsburg, PSG and Lyon making it to the last four.
ITALY: Jose Mourinho takes his Roma side to the San Siro to face his former club Inter, while Lazio take on Milan in Rome.
SCOTLAND: The second phase of the Premiership season begins.

Sunday April 24

WOMEN'S: The second Champions League semi-final takes place.

Women's Champions League semis...Arsenal's conquerors Wolfsburg

EUROPE: The final of the UEFA Youth League is hosted in Nyon.
ENGLAND: Frank Lampard faces his first Merseyside derby as Everton manager, with the Toffees heading to Anfield. Elsewhere, Chelsea play West Ham United.

Tuesday April 26

EUROPE: The first leg of the first Champions League semi-final takes place, with Manchester City or Atletico Madrid hosting Chelsea or Real Madrid.

Wednesday April 27

EUROPE: The second Champions League semi-final first leg gets underway, featuring either Benfica or Liverpool and Villarreal or Bayern Munich.

Thursday April 28

EUROPE: In the semi-finals of the Europa League West Ham United or Lyon face Eintracht Frankfurt or Barcelona, while the other clash will feature RB Leipzig or Atalanta against Braga or Rangers. In the Europa Conference League, Leicester City or PSV will host Bodo/Glimt or Roma, and Feyenoord or Slavia Prague will face Marseille or PAOK.

Saturday April 30

ENGLAND: Newcastle United host Liverpool in the early Premier League kick-off, and Leeds United face Manchester City at 5.30pm.
WOMEN'S: The second leg of the Champions League semi-final takes place.

Sunday May 1

WOMEN'S: The second leg of the other Champions League semi-final takes place.
ENGLAND: Everton manager Frank Lampard takes on his old club Chelsea, while West Ham face off with Arsenal in a London derby.

Monday May 2

ENGLAND: Manchester United face Brentford at Old Trafford.

Tuesday May 3

EUROPE: The first Champions League finalist will be decided, with the second leg of the semi-final.

Wednesday May 4

EUROPE: The Champions League semi-finals conclude, with the other second leg taking place.

Thursday May 5

EUROPE: The semi-final second legs of the Europa League and Europa Conference League will decide the respective finalists.

Saturday May 7

FRANCE: Nantes take on Nice in the final of the French Cup.

French Cup finalists... Nantes v Nice

ENGLAND: Liverpool face Tottenham Hotspur at Anfield.
GERMANY: Bayer Leverkusen take on another top-four rival when they face Hoffenheim.
SPAIN: It's the Madrid derby between Atletico and Real, while Real Betis play Barcelona.
PORTUGAL: Benfica host Porto in the penultimate clash of the Portuguese league season.

Sunday May 8

NETHERLANDS: Feyenoord take on PSV in the Eredivisie.
WOMEN'S: The English WSL concludes, with defending champions Chelsea v Manchester United the standout fixture.

Wednesday May 11

ITALY: The Italian Cup final takes place at Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

Saturday May 14

ENGLAND: The men's FA Cup final takes place at Wembley, with the women's final happening a day later at the same ground.
ITALY: Milan play Atalanta at the San Siro in the penultimate matchday in Serie A.

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Internationals

2022 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

EUROPE Section

● *13 finals places available (3 via the play-offs)*

Second Round – Semi-Finals

Path A

Scotland -
Ukraine -
Postponed until June, along with the Path A final

Mar 24 – Cardiff
Wales 2 (Bale 25, 51)
Austria 1 (Sabitzer 64)
Wales: Hennessey - C. Roberts, Ampadu, Rodon, B. Davies, N. Williams, Ramsey, Allen, Wilson, Bale (Mepham 90+3), James (Johnson 88).
Austria: Lindner - Lainer (Gregoritsch 88), Dragovic, Hinterreger, Alaba, Laimer (Kalajdzic 55), Schlager (Lazaro 77), Seiwald, Baumgartner (Weimann 77), Sabitzer, Arnautovic.

Path B

Russia -
Poland -
Poland given a bye to the Path B final

Mar 24 – Solna
Sweden 1 (Quaison 110)
Czech Republic 0
After Extra-Time
Sweden: Olsen - Danielson, Lindelof, Nilsson, M. Olsson (Bengtsson 61), Claesson (Quaison 62), K. Olsson (Karlstrom 107), Ekdal (Svanberg 72), Forsberg (Elanga 115), Kulusevski, Isak (Helander 115).
Czech Republic: Vaclik - Zima, Brabec, Holes, Masopust (Havel 76), Soucek, Sadilek (Sykora 90+2), Jankto (Mateju 76), Barak (Krejci 90+2), Hlozek (Lingr 111), Kuchta (Pekhart 83).

Path C

Mar 24 – Palermo
Italy 0
North Macedonia 1 (Trajkovski 90+2)
Italy: Donnarumma - Florenzi, Mancini (Chiellini 90), Bastoni, Emerson, Barella (Tonali 77), Jorginho, Verratti, Berardi (Joao Pedro 89), Immobile (Pellegrini 77), Insigne (Raspadori 64).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski - S. Ristovski, Velkovski (Ristevski 86), Musliu, Alioski, Ademi (Ashkovski 59), Churlinov, Nikolov (Spirovski 59), Bardhi, Trajkovski, M. Ristovski (Miovski 72).

Mar 24 – Porto
Portugal 3 (Otavio 15, Jota 42, M. Nunes 90+4)
Turkey 1 (Yilmaz 65)
Portugal: D. Costa - Dalot, Fonte, Danilo, Guerreiro (N. Mendes 88), J. Moutinho (M. Nunes 88), B. Fernandes (William 80), B. Silva, Otavio (R. Leao 89), Ronaldo, Jota (Joao Felix 71).
Turkey: Cakir - Celik (Yazici 80), Kabak, Demiral, Soyuncu, Kutlu (Dursun 90), Kokcu (Tokoz 80), Calhanoglu, Under, Akturkoglu (Unal 66), Yilmaz.

Second Round – Finals

Path B

Mar 29 – Chorzow
Poland 2 (Lewandowski 49 pen, Zielinski 72)
Sweden 0
Poland: Szczesny - Cash, Glik, Bednarek, Bereszynski, Bielik, Zielinski (Buksa 89), Goralski (Krychowiak 46), Moder, Szymanski, Lewandowski.
Sweden: Olsen – Krafth, Lindelof, Danielson (Ibrahimovic 79), Augustinsson, Kulusevski, K. Olsson (Karlsson 80), Karlstrom (Svanberg 67), Forsberg, Quaison (Elanga 66), Isak.

Path C

Mar 29 – Porto
Portugal 2 (B. Fernandes 32, 65)
North Macedonia 0
Portugal: D. Costa - Cancelo, Pepe, Danilo, N. Mendes, J. Moutinho (Vitinha 90+1), B. Fernandes (M. Nunes 88), B. Silva (Joao Felix 87), Otavio (William 77), Ronaldo, Jota (R. Leao 77).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski - S. Ristovski, Velkovski, Musliu, Alioski, Ademi, Bardhi, Kostadinov (Ashkovski 75), Elmas (Nikolov 87), Trajkovski (Churlinov 59), M. Ristovski (Miovski 46).

AFRICA Section

● *5 finals places available*

Third Round

Play-Offs – 1st leg

Mar 25 – Douala
Cameroon 0
Algeria 1 (Slimani 40)
Cameroon: A. Onana - Fai, Castelletto, Ngadeu, Tolo, Hongla (Soni 46), Oum Gouet, J. Onana (Ondoua 85), Toko Ekambi, Choupo-Moting, Aboubakar (Tawamba 46).
Algeria: M'Bolhi - Bedrane (Tahrat 89), Mandi, Benlamri, Benayada, Zerrouki (Bendebka 76), Bennacer (Guedioura 86), Bensebaini, Mahrez (Feghouli 76), Belaili, Slimani (Belfodil 76).

Mar 25 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 1 (Wissa 12)
Morocco 1 (Tissoudali 76)
DR Congo: Kiassumbua - Amale, Luyindama, Mbemba, Muzinga, Akolo (Bolasie 67), Kayembe, Bastien, Wissa (Bongonda 75), Mbokani (Malango 67), Bakambu (Bokadi 88).
Sent off: Muzinga 85.
Morocco: Bono - Hakimi, S. Mmaee, Saiss, Aguerd, Masina (Alakouch 84), Amrabat, Louza (Fajr 84), Amallah (Boufal 90), R. Mmaee (El Kaabi 71), En-Nesyri (Tissoudali 70).

Mar 25 – Cairo
Egypt 1 (Ciss 4 og)
Senegal 0
Egypt: El Shenawy - Gaber, Abdelmonem (Ibrahim 39), El Wensh, El Fotouh, Fathi, Elneny, El Solia, Salah, Mohamed (Marmoush 72), Trezeguet (Donga 90+2).
Senegal: E. Mendy - B. Sarr, Diallo (Cisse 14), Koulibaly, Ciss, Kouyate (P. Gueye 90), N. Mendy, I. Gueye, I. Sarr, Mane, Diedhiou (Dieng 62).

Mar 25 – Kumasi
Ghana 0
Nigeria 0
Ghana: Wollacott - Odoi, Amartey, Djiku, Mensah, Partey, Baba, Kudus, Fatawu (Bukari 79), J. Ayew (Wriedt 90+2), Ohene-Gyan (Kyereh 82).
Nigeria: Uzoho - Aina, Troost-Ekong, Balogun, Sanusi (Bassey 74), Ayodele-Aribo (Onyeka 59), Innocent (Etebo 62), Simon (Lookman 74), Iheanacho, Chukwueze (Dennis 59), Osimhen.

Mar 25 – Bamako
Mali 0
Tunisia 1 (Sissako 36 og)
Mali: Mounkoro - C. Traore (Doumbia 83), Sissako, Kouyate, M. Haidara, A. Haidara, Doucoure (Fofana 46), Bissouma, Dorgeles (Djenepo 46), Diaby (Guindo 90+1), Kone (A. Traore 46).
Sent off: Sissako 40.
Tunisia: Ben Said - Drager, Ghandri, Talbi, Maaloul, Laidouni, Chaalali, Ben Romdhane, Sliti (Ben Ouannes 85), Jaziri (Khenissi 65), Msakni (Ben Slimane 85).

Play-Offs – 2nd leg

Mar 29 – Blida
Algeria 1 (Touba 118)
Cameroon 2 (Choupo-Moting 22, Toko Ekambi 120+4)
Algeria: M'Bolhi - Bedrane, Mandi, Benlamri, Benayada, Zerrouki (Bendebka 76), Bennacer, Atal (Touba 97), Mahrez, Belaili (Ghezzal 109), Slimani (Belfodil 120+2).
Cameroon: A. Onana - Fai, Castelletto, Ngadeu, Oyongo (Kunde 87), Hongla, Ondoua (J. Onana 111), Oum Gouet (Aboubakar 102), Toko Ekambi, Choupo-Moting (Tolo 63), Tawamba (Ganago 111).
AET. 2-2 on aggregate. Cameroon win on away goals

Mar 29 – Casablanca
Morocco 4 (Ounahi 21, 54, Tissoudali 45+7, Hakimi 69)
DR Congo 1 (Malango 77)
Morocco: Bono (Munir 43) - Hakimi, El Yamiq (S. Mmaee 9), Saiss, Aguerd, Masina (Attiyat Allah 81), Amrabat, Ounahi, Amallah, El Kaabi (R. Mmaee 81), Tissoudali (Boufal 80).
DR Congo: Kiassumbua - Amale, Luyindama (Kakuta 46), Tisserand, Mbemba, Masuaku, Bastien (Bongonda 77), Kayembe, Wissa (Malango 77), Elia (Kebano 85), Bakambu (Mbokani 85).
Morocco win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 29 – Abuja
Nigeria 1 (Troost-Ekong 22 pen)
Ghana 1 (Partey 10)
Nigeria: Uzoho - Aina, Troost-Ekong, Balogun, Bassey (Sadiq 88), Etebo (Musa 78), Ayodele-Aribo, Onyeka (Shehu 46), Lookman (Simon 61), Dennis (Ighalo 78), Osimhen.
Ghana: Wollacott - Odoi, Amartey, Djiku, Mensah, Partey, Baba (Yiadom 46), Kudus (Bukari 73), Fatawu (Kyereh 46), J. Ayew (Owusu 46), Ohene-Gyan (Wriedt 90).
AET. 1-1 on aggregate. Ghana win on away goals

Mar 29 – Dakar
Senegal 1 (Dia 3)
Egypt 0
Senegal: E. Mendy - Sabaly, Koulibaly, Cisse, Ciss, B. Sarr (Dieng 68), N. Mendy (Kouyate 81), I. Gueye (P. Sarr 114), I. Sarr, Mane, Dia (P. Gueye 81).
Egypt: El Shenawy - Rabia (Ashour 36), Gaber (Ashraf 29), Ibrahim, El Fotouh, Fathi, Elneny (Donga 70), El Solia, Salah, Marmoush (Mohamed 70), Trezeguet (Zizo 70).
AET. 1-1 on aggregate. Senegal win 3-1 on pens

Mar 29 – Tunis
Tunisia 0
Mali 0
Tunisia: Ben Said - Drager, Ghandri, Talbi, Maaloul, Laidouni, Chaalali, Ben Romdhane (Ifa 90+1), Sliti (Mejbri 90+1), Jaziri (Khenissi 66), Msakni (Skhiri 67).
Mali: Mounkoro - H. Traore, Kouyate, Fofana, M. Haidara, Samassekou (Dieng 73), A. Traore, A. Haidara (Camara 34), Bissouma (Doucoure 73), Djenepo (Doumbia 64), Diaby (Kone 73).
Tunisia win 1-0 on aggregate

ASIA Section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Third Round

Group A

Mar 24 – Baghdad
Iraq 1 (Al Saedi 53)
United Arab Emirates 0

Mar 24 – Sidon
Lebanon 0
Syria 3 (Al Dali 14, Mardikian 38 pen, Al Marmour 44)

Mar 24 – Seoul
S. Korea 2 (Heung-min 45+2, Young-gwon 62)
Iran 0

Mar 29 – Mashhad
Iran 2 (Azmoun 35, Jahanbakhsh 72)
Lebanon 0

Mar 29 – Dubai
Syria 1 (Al Dali 3)
Iraq 1 (Hussein 31)

Mar 29 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 1 (Al Maazmi 54)
South Korea 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	10	8	1	1	15	4	25
South Korea (Q)	10	7	2	1	13	3	23
UAE (P)	10	3	3	4	7	7	12
Iraq	10	1	6	3	6	12	9
Syria	10	1	3	6	9	16	6
Lebanon	10	1	3	6	5	13	6

Group B

Mar 24 – Sydney
Australia 0
Japan 2 (Mitoma 89, 90+4)

Mar 24 – Sharjah
China 1 (Zhu Chenjie 82 pen)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Shehri 45+1)

Mar 24 – Hanoi
Vietnam 0
Oman 1 (Al Hajri 75)

Mar 29 – Saitama
Japan 1 (Yoshida 55)
Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Thanh Binh 19)

Mar 29 – Muscat
Oman 2 (Al Alawi 12, Fawaz 74)
China 0

Mar 29 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Dawsari 65 pen)
Australia 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia (Q)	10	7	2	1	12	6	23
Japan (Q)	10	7	1	2	12	4	22
Australia (P)	10	4	3	3	15	9	15
Oman	10	4	2	4	11	10	14
China	10	1	3	6	9	19	6
Vietnam	10	1	1	8	8	19	4

CONCACAF Section

● *3.5 finals places available*

Third Round

Mar 24 – San Jose
Costa Rica 1 (Borges 45+1)
Canada 0

Mar 24 – Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Gray 72)
El Salvador 1 (Zavaleta 21)

Mar 24 – Mexico City
Mexico 0
United States 0

Mar 24 – Panama City
Panama 1 (Blackburn 23)
Honduras 1 (K. Lopez 65)

Mar 27 – Toronto
Canada 4 (Larin 13, Buchanan 44, Hoilett 83, Mariappa 88 og)
Jamaica 0

Mar 27 – San Salvador
El Salvador 1 (Gil 31)
Costa Rica 2 (Contreras 30, Campbell 45+1)

Mar 27 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 0
Mexico 1 (Alvarez 70)

Mar 27 – Orlando
United States 5 (Pulisic 17 pen, 45+4 pen, 65, Arriola 23, Ferreira 27)
Panama 1 (Godoy 86)

Mar 30 – San Jose
Costa Rica 2 (Vargas 51, Contreras 59)
United States 0

Mar 30 – Kingston
Jamaica 2 (Bailey 39 pen, Morrison 45+2)
Honduras 1 (Tejeda 18 pen)

Mar 30 – Mexico City
Mexico 2 (Antuna 17, Jimenez 43 pen)
El Salvador 0

Mar 30 – Panama City
Panama 1 (Torres 49)
Canada 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Canada (Q)	14	8	4	2	23	7	28
Mexico (Q)	14	8	4	2	17	8	28
USA (Q)	14	7	4	3	21	10	25
Costa Rica (P)	14	7	4	3	13	8	25
Panama	14	6	3	5	17	19	21
Jamaica	14	2	5	7	12	22	11
El Salvador	14	2	4	8	8	18	10
Honduras	14	0	4	10	7	26	4

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Mar 24 – Rio de Janeiro
Brazil 4 (Neymar 44 pen, Vinicius Jr. 45+1, Coutinho 72 pen, Richarlison 90+1)
Chile 0
Brazil: Alisson - Danilo, Marquinhos, T. Silva, Arana, Fred (B. Guimaraes 82), Casemiro (Fabinho 82), Antony (Richarlison 75), Paqueta (Coutinho 63), Vinicius Jr. (Martinelli 75), Neymar.
Chile: Bravo - Isla, Diaz, Medel, Roco (Montecinos 46), Suazo, Vidal, Aranguiz (Pavez 77), Baeza (Fernandez 61), Sanchez, Vargas (Meneses 76).

Mar 24 – Barranquilla
Colombia 3 (Diaz 39, Borja 72, Uribe 90)
Bolivia 0

Colombia: Ospina - Munoz, Cuesta, Tesillo, Fabra, Cuadrado, G. Cuellar (Moreno 74), James (Uribe 74), Sinisterra (Quintero 65), Diaz (Lerma 84), Muriel (Borja 66).
Bolivia: Cordano - Enoumba (Quinteros 74), Haquin, Carrasco, Sagredo, Fernandez, Menacho (R. Vaca 46), Villarroel (Villamil 84), Gonzales, Garcia (Sanchez 57), Montenegro (J. Cuellar 58).

Mar 24 – Ciudad del Este
Paraguay 3 (Morales 10, Hincapie 45+6 og, Almiron 54)
Ecuador 1 (J. Caicedo 85 pen)
Paraguay: Silva - R. Rojas (Espinola 77), Balbuena, Gomez, Riveros, Cubas (Villasanti 66), Ortiz, Sanchez (Florentin 77), Almiron, Enciso (Colman 77), Morales (A. Romero 14).
Sent off: Riveros 88.
Ecuador: Galindez - Preciado (Ibarra 46), Torres, Hincapie, Estupinan, Gruezo, Mendez (Carcelen 76), Castillo, Mena (J. Caicedo 76), J. Rojas (Sarmiento 46), Valencia (Estrada 58).

Mar 24 – Montevideo
Uruguay 1 (De Arrascaeta 42)
Peru 0
Uruguay: Rochet - Araujo, Godin, Gimenez, Olivera, Pellistri (D. Suarez 84), Bentancur, Valverde, De Arrascaeta (Gomez 84), Nunez (Cavani 67), L. Suarez (Torreira 76).
Peru: Gallese - Advincula, Zambrano, Callens, Trauco, Tapia, Carrillo (Ormeno 65), Pena (Flores 46), Yotun (Gonzales 61), Cueva (Calcaterra 77), Lapadula (Valera 77).

Mar 25 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 3 (Gonzalez 34, Di Maria 79, Messi 82)
Venezuela 0
Argentina: Armani - Molina, Pezzella, Otamendi, Tagliafico, De Paul, Paredes (Rodriguez 88), Gonzalez (Boye 87), Mac Allister (Di Maria 70), J. Correa (A. Correa 64), Messi.
Venezuela: Farinez - Rosales, Ferraresi, Chancellor, Makoun, Navarro (Murillo 46), Jose Martinez, Herrera (Machis 77), Casseres (Gonzalez 62), Josef Martinez (Aristeguieta 62), Rondon (Savarino 83).

Mar 29 – La Paz
Bolivia 0
Brazil 4 (Paqueta 24, Richarlison 45, 90+1, B. Guimarares 66)
Bolivia: Cordano - Herrera (Martinez 46), Quinteros, Carrasco, Sagredo, Fernandez, H. Vaca, Villarroel (Garcia 87), Villamil (R. Vaca 46), Churra (Gonzales 46), Martins.
Brazil: Alisson - Dani Alves, Marquinhos, Militao, Telles (Arana 84), Fabinho, B. Guimaraes, Antony (Rodrgyo 77), Paqueta (Arthur 77), Coutinho (Martinelli 54), Richarlison.

Mar 29 – Santiago
Chile 0
Uruguay 2 (L. Suarez 79, Valverde 90)
Chile: Cortes - Isla, Medel, Kuscevic, Suazo, Vidal (Meneses 81), Pulgar (Valdes 67), Aranguiz, Montecinos, Sanchez, Brereton Diaz (Fernandez 80).
Uruguay: Rochet - Araujo, Godin, Coates, Vina, Torreira (Ugarte 74), Bentancur (Gomez 74), De la Cruz (De Arrascaeta 63), Valverde, Rossi (D. Suarez 74), Cavani (L. Suarez 29).

Mar 29 – Guayaquil
Ecuador 1 (Valencia 90+3)
Argentina 1 (Alvarez 24)
Ecuador: Galindez - Castillo (Preciado 82), Arboleda, Hincapie, Estupinan, Franco (Valencia 60), Gruezo (Sarmiento 73), M. Caicedo, Plata, Estrada (J. Caicedo 82), Ibarra (Mena 60).
Argentina: Rulli - Montiel (Foyth 78), Martinez Quarta, Otamendi, Tagliafico, De Paul, Paredes (Rodriguez 78), Mac Allister (Palacios 59), Alvarez (A. Correa 72), Messi, Gonzalez (Ocampos 78).

Mar 29 – Lima
Peru 2 (Lapadula 5, Yotun 42)
Paraguay 0
Peru: Gallese - Advincula, Zambrano (Ramos 87), Callens, Trauco, Tapia, Flores, Pena (Gonzales 66), Yotun (Calcaterra 69), Cueva (Costa 87), Lapadula (Valera 87).
Paraguay: Silva - R. Rojas, Balbuena, Alderete, Alonso (Torres 59), Cubas, Sanchez (Medina 59), Ortiz, O. Romero (Colman 73), Enciso, Ferreira (A. Romero 73).

Mar 29 – Ciudad Guayana
Venezuela 0
Colombia 1 (James 45+4 pen)
Venezuela: Farinez - Hernandez, Ferraresi, Makoun, Gonzalez, Jose Martinez (Savarino 81), Rincon (Otero 67), Herrera, Machis (Murillo 46), Soteldo, Rondon.
Colombia: Ospina - Munoz, Cuesta (Moreno 37), Sanchez, Tesillo, Barrios, Lerma (G. Cuellar 77), Sinisterra (Suarez 64), James (Quintero 63), Diaz, Santos Borre (Preciado 76).

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brazil (Q)	17	14	3	0	40	5	45
Argentina (Q)	17	11	6	0	27	8	39
Uruguay (Q)	18	8	4	6	22	22	28
Ecuador (Q)	18	7	5	6	27	19	26
Peru (P)	18	7	3	8	19	22	24
Colombia	18	5	8	5	20	19	23
Chile	18	5	4	9	19	26	19
Paraguay	18	3	7	8	12	26	16
Bolivia	18	4	3	11	23	42	15
Venezuela	18	3	1	14	14	34	10

OCEANIA Section

● *0.5 finals places available*

Group Stage

Group A

Mar 24 – Doha
Solomon Islands 3 (Lea'i 20, 52, 90+6)
Tahiti 1 (A. Tehau 26)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Solomon Islands (Q)	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
Tahiti (Q)	1	0	0	1	1	3	0
Cook Islands*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vanuatu*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Vanuatu and Cook Islands withdrew*

Group B

Mar 18 – Doha
New Caledonia 1 (Wetria 78)
Fiji 2 (Nalaubu 11, 89)

Mar 18 – Doha
Papua New Guinea 0
New Zealand 1 (Waine 75)

Mar 21 – Doha
New Zealand 4 (Wood 45, 73, Just 71, Lewis 90+3 pen)
Fiji 0

Mar 21 – Doha
Papua New Guinea 1 (Semmy 8)
New Caledonia 0

Mar 24 – Doha
Fiji 1 (Waranaivalu 12)
Papua New Guinea 2 (A. Kepo 45+2, Semmy 63)

Mar 24 – Doha
New Zealand 7 (Greive 8, 45+2, Rogerson 36 pen, De Jong 75, Tuiloma 81, Wood 83, 89)
New Caledonia 1 (Saiko 12)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
New Zealand (Q)	3	3	0	0	12	1	9
Papua New Guinea (Q)	3	2	0	1	3	2	6
Fiji	3	1	0	2	3	7	4
New Caledonia	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

Final Stage

Semi-Finals

Mar 27 – Doha
Solomon Islands 3 (Hou 33, 66, Lea'i 71)
Papua New Guinea 2 (A. Komolong 24, A. Kepo 88)

Mar 27 – Doha
New Zealand 1 (Cacace 71)
Tahiti 0

Final

Mar 30 – Doha
Solomon Islands 0
New Zealand 5 (Tuiloma 23, 69, Wood 39, Bell 49, Garbett 90+1)

2020-21 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Relegation Play-Outs – 1st leg

Mar 24 – Tallinn
Estonia 0
Cyprus 0

Mar 24 – Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Nicolaescu 45+1)
Kazakhstan 2 (Malyi 63, Posmac 79 og)

Relegation Play-Outs – 2nd leg

Mar 29 – Larnaca
Cyprus 2 (Tzionis 19, Sotiriou 51)
Estonia 0
Cyprus win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 29 – Nur-Sultan
Kazakhstan 0
Moldova 1 (Armas 13)
AET. 2-2 on aggregate. Kazakhstan win 5-4 on pens

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS 2023

Preliminary Round – 1st leg

Mar 23 – Yaounde
Chad 0
Gambia 1 (Trawally 80)

Mar 23 – Borg El Arab
Djibouti 2 (Akinbinu 64, Warsama 90+3)
South Sudan 4 (Okello 54 pen, 75, Toha 68, Gama 89)

Mar 23 – Saint Pierre
Seychelles 0
Lesotho 0

Mar 23 – Dar es Salaam
Somalia 0
Eswatini 3 (Dlamini 23, Mamba 64, Gamedze 87)

Mar 24 – Sao Tome
Sao Tome e Principe 1 (Leal 36)
Mauritius 0

Preliminary Round – 2nd leg

Mar 27 –Mbombela
Eswatini 2 (Ndzinisa 46, Mamba 56)
Somalia 1 (Hassan 90)
Eswatini win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 27 – Soweto
Lesotho 3 (Makateng 5, 78, Tseka 9)
Seychelles 1 (Ernesta 25 pen)
Lesotho win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 27 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 3 (Bru 21 pen, Collard 57, Nazira 90+1)
Sao Tome e Principe 3 (Cardoso 27, 60, Leal 34)
Sao Tome e Principe win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 27 – Entebbe
South Sudan 1 (Chol 55)
Djibouti 0
South Sudan win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 29 – Agadir
Gambia 2 (Ceesay 30, 90+2 pen)
Chad 2 (Abderamane 28, N'Douassel 48 pen)
Gambia win 3-2 on aggregate

FRIENDLIES

Mar 24 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Bichakhchyan 19)
Montenegro 0

Mar 24 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Serbia 1 (Z. Nagy 35 og)

Mar 24 – Glasgow
Scotland 1 (Tierney 68)
Poland 1 (Piatek 90+4 pen)

Mar 25 – Oslo
Norway 2 (Haaland 77, Odegaard 80)
Slovakia 0

Mar 25 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Greece 1 (Bouchalakis 39)

Mar 25 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 1 (Martins 58)
N. Ireland 3 (Magennis 16, Davis 83, Whyte 85)

Mar 25 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0
Georgia 1 (Zivzivadze 49)

Mar 25 – Marseille
France 2 (Giroud 22, Tchouameni 90+3)
Ivory Coast 1 (Pepe 19)

Mar 26 – Al Rayyan
Croatia 1 (Kramaric 39)
Slovenia 1 (Bijol 90+1)

Mar 26 – Murcia
Finland 1 (Pukki 12)
Iceland 1 (Bi. Bjarnason 38)

Mar 26 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Ogbene 35, Browne 85)
Belgium 2 (Batshuayi 12, Vanaken 58)

Mar 26 – Wembley
England 2 (Shaw 45+1, Kane 78 pen)
Switzerland 1 (Embolo 22)

Mar 26 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 2 (Afif 27 pen, Khoukhi 74)
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 60)

Mar 26 – Cornella de Llobregat
Spain 2 (F. Torres 75, Olmo 90)
Albania 1 (Uzuni 85)

Mar 26 – Hoffenheim
Germany 2 (Havertz 36, Werner 45+1)
Israel 0

Mar 26 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 4 (Bergwijn 16, 71, Ake 29, Depay 37 pen)
Denmark 2 (Vestegaard 20, Eriksen 47)

Mar 28 – Podgorica
Montenegro 1 (Osmajic 59)
Greece 0

Mar 29 – Al Rayyan
Croatia 2 (Modric 76 pen, Kramaric 80)
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 69)

Mar 29 – Murcia
Finland 0
Slovakia 2 (Duda 38, Jirka 72)

Mar 29 – Copenhagen
Denmark 3 (Maehle 15, Lindstrom 53, Eriksen 57)
Serbia 0

Mar 29 – Zurich
Switzerland 1 (Lotomba 61)
Kosovo 1 (Rashica 52)

Mar 29 – Oslo
Norway 9 (Haaland 24, 45+1, King 28 pen, 33, 59, Thorstvedt 30, Daehli 80, Sorloth 86, 90+1)
Armenia 0

Mar 29 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 0
Slovenia 0

Mar 29 – Netanya
Israel 2 (Dabbur 57, 85)
Romania 2 (Cicaldau 10, Man 23)

Mar 29 – La Coruna
Spain 5 (Morata 36, 39 pen, Yeremy 47, Sarabia 61, 72)
Iceland 0

Mar 29 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Dzeko 86)
Luxembourg 0

Mar 29 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 1 (Bergwijn 68)
Germany 1 (Muller 45+1)

Mar 29 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Hungary 1 (Sallai 55)

Mar 29 – Wembley
England 3 (Watkins 30, Sterling 45, Mings 90+3)
Ivory Coast 0

Mar 29 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Parrott 90+7)
Lithuania 0

Mar 29 – Brussels
Belgium 3 (Vanaken 16, Trossard 18, Benteke 75)
Burkina Faso 0

Mar 29 – Konya
Turkey 2 (Under 4, Dursun 83)
Italy 3 (Cristante 35, Raspadori 39, 65)

Mar 29 – Vienna
Austria 2 (Gregoritsch 75, Schopf 82)
Scotland 2 (Hendry 28, McGinn 56)

Mar 29 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Colwill 34)
Czech Republic 1 (Soucek 32)

Mar 29 – Lille
France 5 (Mbappe 23, 76 pen, Giroud 33, Ben Yedder 81, Guendouzi 90+2)
South Africa 0

Club Football EUROPE

2021-22 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 2nd leg

Mar 8 – Munich
Bayern Munich 7 (Lewandowski 12 pen, 21 pen, 23, Gnabry 31, Muller 54, 83, Sane 85)
Red Bull Salzburg 1 (Kjaergaard 70)
Bayern Munich win 8-2 on aggregate

Mar 8 – Liverpool
Liverpool 0
Internazionale 1 (Martinez 62)
Liverpool win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 9 – Madrid
Real Madrid 3 (Benzema 61, 76, 78)
Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Mbappe 39)
Real Madrid win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 9 – Manchester
Manchester City 0
Sporting 0
Manchester City win 5-0 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Manchester
Manchester United 0
Atletico Madrid 1 (Lodi 41)
Atletico Madrid win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Amsterdam
Ajax 0
Benfica 1 (Nunez 77)
Benfica win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Lille
Lille 1 (Yilmaz 38 pen)
Chelsea 2 (Pulisic 45+3, Azpilicueta 71)
Chelsea win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Turin
Juventus 0
Villarreal 3 (G. Moreno 78 pen, Torres 85, Danjuma 90+2 pen)
Villarreal win 4-1 on aggregate

2021-22 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 1st leg

Mar 9 – Porto
Porto 0
Lyon 1 (Paqueta 59)

Mar 10 – Glasgow
Rangers 3 (Tavernier 11 pen, Morelos 15, Balogun 51)
Red Star Belgrade 0

Mar 10 – Braga
Braga 2 (Ruiz 3, V. Oliveira 89)
Monaco 0

Mar 10 – Bergamo
Atalanta 3 (Malinovskyi 23, Muriel 25, 49)
Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Aranguiz 11, Diaby 63)

Mar 10 – Seville
Sevilla 1 (Munir 60)
West Ham United 0

Mar 10 – Barcelona
Barcelona 0
Galatasaray 0

Mar 10 – Seville
Real Betis 1 (Fekir 30)
Eintracht Frankfurt 2 (Kostic 14, Kamada 32)

RB Leipzig -
Spartak Moscow -
RB Leipzig given a bye to the quarter-finals

Round of 16 – 2nd leg

Mar 17 – Lyon
Lyon 1 (Dembele 13)
Porto 1 (Pepe 27)
Lyon win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade 2 (Ivanic 10, Ben 90+3)
Rangers 1 (Kent 56)
Rangers win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Monaco
Monaco 1 (Disasi 90)
Braga 1 (Ruiz 20)
Braga win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen 0
Atalanta 1 (Boga 90+1)
Atalanta win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – London
West Ham United 2 (Soucek 39, Yarmolenko 112)
Sevilla 0
After Extra-Time. West Ham win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Istanbul
Galatasaray 1 (Marcao 29)
Barcelona 2 (Pedri 37, Aubameyang 49)
Barcelona win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Rodriguez 120+1 og)
Real Betis 1 (Iglesias 90)
After Extra-Time. Franfkurt win 2-1 on aggregate

2021-22 UEFA CONFERENCE EUROPA LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 1st leg

Mar 10 – Marseille
Marseille 2 (Milik 19 pen, 68)
Basel 1 (Esposito 80)

Mar 10 – Leicester
Leicester City 2 (Albrighton 30, Iheanacho 90+3)
Rennes 0

Mar 10 – Thessaloniki
PAOK 1 (Kurtic 58)
Gent 0

Mar 10 – Arnhem
Vitesse 0
Roma 1 (Oliveira 45+1)

Mar 10 – Eindhoven
PSV 4 (Gakpo 21, 70, Doan 50, Zahavi 85)
Copenhagen 4 (Johanesson 6, Biel 23, 78, Lerager 43)

Mar 10 – Prague
Slavia Prague 4 (Sor 3, 29, Olayinka 83, Traore 85)
LASK 1 (Balic 67)

Mar 10 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt 2 (Pellegrino 39, Solbakken 90+1 pen)
AZ 1 (Aboukhlal 73)

Mar 10 – Belgrade
Partizan Belgrade 2 (Natkho 13, Jovic 46)
Feyenoord 5 (Toornstra 20, 77, Dessers 52, Geertruida 64, Sinisterra 71)

Round of 16 – 2nd leg

Mar 17 – Basel
Basel 1 (Ndoye 62)
Marseille 2 (Under 74, Rongier 90+3)
Marseille win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Rennes
Rennes 2 (Bourigeaud 8, Tait 76)
Leicester City 1 (Fofana 51)
Leicester City win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Gent
Gent 1 (Depoitre 40)
PAOK 2 (Crespo 20, Douglas Augusto 77)
PAOK win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Rome
Roma 1 (Abraham 90+1)
Vitesse 1 (Wittek 62)
Roma win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen 0
PSV 4 (Zahavi 10, 79, Gotze 38, Madueke 90+1)
PSV win 8-4 on aggregate

Mar 17 – St Polten
LASK 4 (Wiesinger 36, 76, Gruber 88, Schmidt 90)
Slavia Prague 3 (Olayinka 24, Bah 37, Sor 62)
Slavia Prague win 7-5 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord 3 (Dessers 45, Nelson 59, Linssen 90)
Partizan Belgrade 1 (Gomes 61)
Feyenoord win 8-3 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Alkmaar
AZ 2 (Pavlidis 18, 30)
Bodo/Glimt 2 (Pellegrino 26, Sampsted 105+1)
After Extra-Time. Bodo/Glimt win 4-3 on aggregate

AFRICA

2021-22 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Mar 5 – Cairo
Al Ahly 3 (Sherif 2, 34, Karshoum 76 og)
Al Merrikh 2 (Edjomariegwe 43, Saadeldin 69)

Mar 11 – Omdurman
Al Hilal Omdurman 1 (Muzmel 84)
Al Merrikh 0

Mar 12 – Johannesburg
Mamelodi Sundowns 1 (Shalulile 23)
Al Ahly 0

Mar 18 – Cairo
Al Merrikh 1 (Agab 60)
Al Ahly 3 (Tau 19, Sherif 62, Abdel Kader 73)

Mar 19 – Omdurman
Al Hilal Omdurman 2 (Muzmel 56, Mokthar 90+3)
Mamelodi Sundowns 4 (Shalulile 2, Mokoena 30, Morena 60, 89)

Apr 2 – Rustenburg
Mamelodi Sundowns 3 (Maluleka 15, Ralani 66, Erasmus 72)
Al Merrikh 0

Apr 3 – Cairo
Al Ahly 1 (El Shahat 74)
Al Hilal Omdurman 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi S. (Q)	6	5	1	0	10	2	16
Al Ahly (Q)	6	3	1	2	7	5	10
Al Hilal O.	6	1	1	4	4	8	4
Al Merrikh	6	1	1	4	5	11	4

Group B

Mar 12 – Conakry
Horoya 2 (Mandela 26, Barry 29 pen)
Raja 1 (Ahadad 19)

Mar 12 – Algiers
ES Setif 2 (Benayad 11, Djahnit 45+1)
AmaZulu 0

Mar 18 – Durban
AmaZulu 0
Raja 2 (Ahadad 6, Haddad 76)

Mar 18 – Algiers
ES Setif 3 (Djahnit 47, Benayad 87, 90+3)
Horoya 2 (Baffour 25, Sylla 59)

Apr 1 – Conakry
Horoya 1 (Nikiema 45)
AmaZulu 1 (Coulibaly 48 og)

Apr 3 – Casablanca
Raja 1 (Hadhoudi 74)
ES Setif 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja (Q)	6	5	0	1	7	2	15
ES Setif (Q)	6	3	0	3	6	5	9
AmaZulu	6	2	1	3	3	6	7
Horoya	6	1	1	4	5	8	4

Group C

Mar 11 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad 4 (Bakir 25 pen, Aribi 41, Selmi 70, Merzougui 90+1)
Jwaneng Galaxy 1 (Sesiniyi 49)

Mar 12 – Tunis
Etoile du Sahel 0
Esperance 2 (Bedrane 66, Ben Romdhane 77)

Mar 19 – Francistown
Jwaneng Galaxy 0
Esperance 3 (Eduwo 13, 64, Iwuala 32)

Mar 19 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad 2 (Bouchar 3, Belkhir 18)
Etoile du Sahel 0

Apr 1 – Tunis
Etoile du Sahel 3 (Kombe 9, Jemmali 70, Amri 82)
Jwaneng Galaxy 2 (Baruti 80, 85)

Apr 2 – Tunis
Esperance 2 (Bougrine 13, Iwuala 17)
CR Belouizdad 1 (Mrezigue 2)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance (Q)	6	4	2	0	12	2	14
Belouizdad (Q)	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Etoile du Sahel	6	1	3	2	4	7	6
Jwaneng G.	6	0	1	5	5	17	1

Group D

Mar 11 – Cairo
Zamalek 0
Wydad 1 (Jabrane 48 pen)

Mar 12 – Luanda
Petro de Luanda 3 (Azulao 1, 44, Castro 90+5 pen)
Sagrada Esperanca 0

Mar 19 – Luanda
Petro de Luanda 0
Zamalek 0

Mar 19 – Luanda
Sagrada Esperanca 1 (Paciencia 30)
Wydad 2 (El Moutaraji 82, Tsoumou 90+5)

Apr 1 – Cairo
Zamalek 0
Sagrada Esperanca 0

Apr 2 – Casablanca
Wydad 5 (Tsoumou 11, Dari 29, El Moutaraji 32, El Hassouni 56, Ellafi 71)
Petro de Luanda 1 (Pinto 63)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wydad (Q)	6	5	0	1	15	5	15
Petro de Luanda (Q)	6	3	2	1	9	8	11
Zamalek	6	0	4	2	3	6	4
Sagrada E.	6	0	2	4	1	9	2

ASIA

2022 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Preliminary Round

East Region

Mar 8 – Sydney
Sydney FC 5 (Buhagiar 30, Bobo 47, 49 pen, Le Fondre 71, 81)
Kaya-Iloilo 0

Melbourne Victory -
Shan United -
Melbourne Victory given a bye to the play-offs

Play-Off Round

East Region

Mar 15 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe 4 (Iniesta 6, Osako 80, 87, Lincoln 95)
Melbourne Victory 3 (D'Agostino 12, 71, Folami 90)
After Extra-Time

Mar 15 – Ulsan
Ulsan Hyundai 3 (Choi Gi-yun 19, Um Won-sang 83, Leonardo 87 pen)
Port 0

Mar 15 – Daegu
Daegu FC 1 (Cesinha 120+1)
Buriram United 1 (Bolingi 119)
After Extra-Time. Daegu FC win 3-2 on pens

Changchun Yatai -
Sydney FC -
Sydney FC given a bye to the group stage

West Region

Mar 15 – Buraidah
Al Taawoun 1 (Al Nabit 81)
Al Jaish 1 (Al Wakid 70)
After Extra-Time. Al Taawoun win 5-4 on pens

Mar 15 – Abu Dhabi
Baniyas 0
Nasaf Qarshi 2 (Nasrullayev 27, Norchayev 75)

Mar 15 – Sharjah
Sharjah 1 (Ba Wazir 89 pen)
Al Zawraa 1 (Abdul-Amir 62)
After Extra-Time. Sharjah win 6-5 on pens

INDIA

Indian Super League 2021-22

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamshedpur*	20	13	4	3	42	21	43
Hyderabad* (C)	20	11	5	4	43	23	38
ATK Mohun Bagan*	20	10	7	3	37	26	37
Kerala Blasters*	20	9	7	4	34	24	34
Mumbai City	20	9	4	7	36	31	31
Bengaluru	20	8	5	7	32	27	29
Odisha	20	6	5	9	31	43	23
Chennaiyin	20	5	5	10	17	35	20
Goa	20	4	7	9	29	35	19
NorthEast Utd	20	3	5	12	25	43	14
East Bengal	20	1	8	11	18	36	11

*Hyderabad won play-offs involving top four teams

SOUTH AMERICA

2022 COPA LIBERTADORES

Third Stage Qualifiers – 1st Leg

Mar 8 – Belo Horizonte
America Mineiro 0
Barcelona SC 0

Mar 9 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense 3 (Cano 11, 68, Luiz Henrique 47)
Olimpia 1 (D. Gonzalez 16)

Mar 9 – Vina del Mar
Everton 0
Estudiantes 1 (Pellegrini 79)

Mar 10 – Quito
Universidad Catolica 0
The Strongest 0

Third Stage Qualifiers – 2nd Leg

Mar 15 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC 0
America Mineiro 0
0-0 on aggregate. America Mineiro win 5-4 on pens

Mar 16 – Asuncion
Olimpia 2 (Recalde 36, Paiva 89)
Fluminense 0
3-3 on aggregate. Olimpia win 4-1 on pens

Mar 16 – La Plata
Estudiantes 1 (Rogel 33)
Everton 0
Estudiantes win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 17 – La Paz
The Strongest 2 (Triverio 2, Amaral 84)
Universidad Catolica 1 (Diaz 7)
The Strongest win 2-1 on aggregate

2022 COPA SUDAMERICANA

First Stage – 1st Leg

Bolivia Section

Mar 8 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Royal Pari 2 (Justiniano 28, Alvarez 85)
Oriente Petrolero 3 (Caire 18, Suarez 71, Rojas 83)

Mar 10 – Cochabamba
Jorge Wilstermann 4 (Sanguinetti 24, A. Chavez 38, Serginho 54 pen, Vargas 90+1)
Guabira 0

Chile Section

Mar 8 – Chillan
Nublense 0
Union Calera 0

Mar 10 – Santiago
Union Espanola 1 (Garate 13)
Deportes Antofagasta 2 (Hurtado 6, Robles 9)

Colombia Section

Mar 9 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin 2 (V. Hernandez 45+2, Cadavid 57)
America de Cali 1 (Ramos 48)

Mar 10 – Bogota
La Equidad 0
Junior 0

Ecuador Section

Mar 9 – Ambato
Mushuc Runa 0
LDU Quito 2 (Z. Romero 62, Alvarado 87)

Mar 10 – Manta
Delfin 1 (Chicaiza 72 pen)
9 de Octubre 1 (Becerra 21)

Paraguay Section

Mar 8 – Asuncion
Sol de America 0
General Caballero JLM 3 (Marabel 43, Gonzalez 58, Rodriguez 90)

Mar 10 – Asuncion
Nacional 0
Guairena 1 (Marin 53)

Peru Section

Mar 8 – Cusco
Cienciano 1 (Estrada 48)
Melgar 1 (Cuesta 24 pen)

Mar 9 – Huancayo
Ayacucho 2 (Salazar 35, Royon 58)
Sport Boys 0

Uruguay Section

Mar 9 – Montevideo
Liverpool 0
River Plate 1 (Borbas 18 pen)

Mar 10 – Montevideo
Montevideo Wanderers 2 (Rivero 74, Riolfo 79)
Cerro Largo 1 (Onetto 51)

Venezuela Section

Mar 8 – Merida
Estudiantes de Merida 0
Metropolitanos 2 (Araujo 30, Annese 71)

Mar 10 – Barinas
Hermanos Colmenarez 2 (Magallan 44, Gonzalez 55)
Deportivo La Guaira 0

First Stage – 2nd Leg

Bolivia Section

Mar 15 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Oriente Petrolero 3 (Suarez 65, 84, Zazpe 90+5)
Royal Pari 0
Oriente Petrolero win 6-2 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Montero
Guabira 3 (Mina 20, 50, Figueroa 90+3)
Jorge Wilstermann 0
Jorge Wilstermann win 4-3 on aggregate

Chile Section

Mar 15 – Vina del Mar
Union Calera 2 (Saez 44, Ramirez 64)
Nublense 1 (Vargas 90+4)
Union Calera win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Antofagasta
Deportes Antofagasta 0
Union Espanola 1 (Pineiro 49)
2-2 on aggregate. Antofagasta win 4-1 on pens

Colombia Section

Mar 16 – Cali
America de Cali 2 (Sierra 9, Ramos 63)
Independiente Medellin 1 (Pons 24)
3-3 on aggregate. Medellin win 3-1 on pens

Mar 17 – Barranquilla
Junior 3 (Borja 5, Gonzalez 36, Cabrera 80 pen)
La Equidad 1 (Chaverra 18)
Junior win 3-1 on aggregate

Ecuador Section

Mar 16 – Quito
LDU Quito 1 (Alvarado 27)
Mushuc Runa 1 (Alonso 64)
LDU Quito win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Guayaquil
9 de Octubre 2 (Phillips 35, Luna 40)
Delfin 0
9 de Octubre win 3-1 on aggregate

Paraguay Section

Mar 15 – Asuncion
General Caballero JLM 2 (Heinze 6, Alfonso 57)
Sol de America 1 (Viera 9 pen)
General Caballero JLM win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Asuncion
Guairena 0
Nacional 0
Guairena win 1-0 on aggregate

Peru Section

Mar 15 – Arequipa
Melgar 1 (Cuesta 19)
Cienciano 0
Melgar win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Lima
Sport Boys 3 (Blanco 23 pen, 42, Ramirez 73)
Ayacucho 2 (Techera 51, Quina 63)
Ayacucho win 4-3 on aggregate

Uruguay Section

Mar 16 – Montevideo
River Plate 2 (Borbas 18 pen)
Liverpool 0
River Plate win 3-0 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Montevideo
Cerro Largo 0
Montevideo Wanderers 1 (Pais 63)
Montevideo Wanderers win 3-1 on aggregate

Venezuela Section

Mar 15 – Caracas
Metropolitanos 4 (Flores 34, Ortiz 88, Guaramato 90 og, Cova 90+2)
Estudiantes de Merida 0
Metropolitanos win 6-0 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Caracas
Dep La Guaira 3 (Unrein 5, Ramos 32, Cumana 56)
Hermanos Colmenarez 0
Deportivo La Guaira win 3-2 on aggregate

CONCACAF

2022 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-finals – 1st leg

Mar 8 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 3 (Montero 31 pen, 39, Morris 90+1)
Leon 0

Mar 8 – East Hartford
New York City FC 3 (Castellanos 29, Moralez 65, Rodriguez 71)
Comunicaciones 1 (Gamboa 60)

Mar 9 – Foxborough
New England Revolution 3 (Lletget 19, Buksa 72, 90+2)
UNA Pumas 0

Mar 9 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul 1 (Antuna 20)
CF Montreal 0

Quarter-finals – 2nd leg

Mar 15 – Guatemala City
Comunicaciones 4 (Lezcano 45, Samayoa 69, L. Garcia 72, Contreras 88)
New York City FC 2 (Castellanos 32, Magno 53)
5-5 on aggregate. NYCFC win on away goals

Mar 16 – Mexico City
UNAM Pumas 3 (Dinneno 33, 49, Saucedo 59)
New England Revolution 0
3-3 on aggregate. UNAM Pumas win 4-3 on pens

Mar 16 – Montreal
CF Montreal 1 (Camacho 79)
Cruz Azul 1 (Antuna 44)
Cruz Azul win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 17 – Leon
Leon 1 (Ambriz 90+1)
Seattle Sounders 1 (Montero 45+3)
Seattle Sounders win 4-1 on aggregate

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John Aldridge

Liverpool 3 Nottingham Forest 1

1989, FA Cup semi-final, Old Trafford

Just 22 days had passed between the most harrowing tragedy in English football history and the re-arranged game. Liverpool-born John Aldridge scored twice to seal a 3-1 win on a day overshadowed by the Hillsborough disaster

"It was so much more than a football match to me and everyone else in that Liverpool dressing room.

After all that happened on that fateful day at Hillsborough, the goals I scored in the re-arranged FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest a few weeks later will always be the most important of my career.

I went to the funerals of so many Hillsborough victims and will never forget my encounter with a young lad who was on a life support machine as he recovered from his injuries.

I expected he would recover over time, but doctors told me as I left the hospital that they were turning his life support machine off there and then.

As a Liverpool lad born and bred, these were harrowing times for me and all the players and management who were part of the 1989 Liverpool team. I have had many difficult days trying to come to terms with the reality that supporters came to watch me play a football match and died doing so.

We sometimes say it is a disaster when our team loses, but this was something far more profound. There were empty seats on the coaches heading home to Liverpool that evening and the loss for all concerned is still felt now.

At the time, I remember feeling some guilt. Obviously, those supporters would have been there whether I was playing for Liverpool or not, but you can't get out of your head the idea that they only went to the ground to support you.

We used to see the same faces standing on the Kop every week and would often bump into fans when we got trains to away games, so the reality that some of these fit, healthy people were crushed to death while watching us play football was shocking.

The idea of playing football again was hard to get my head around, but I couldn't give up that easily. The Hillsborough victims wouldn't have wanted that.

The situation came to a head one day at Liverpool's Melwood training ground. We didn't play for a few weeks after Hillsborough and Kenny Dalglish arranged a behind-closed-doors match to try to get us back into the swing of things.

I really didn't feel up to playing this match, but a few hands went up when we were asked who fancied it. I remember Ian Rush was one of those who seemed ready to go again, but I didn't volunteer until the last minute.

After coming on at half-time, I was a total waste of space. My heart wasn't in football at that point and I could hardly kick the ball, but the day reminded me that those who died at Hillsborough would have wanted me to carry on and help Liverpool to succeed in their honour.

We had to win the semi-final, no option.

Whatever happened in the final against Everton, we had to beat Forest as a tribute to those who lost their lives at Hillsborough and that's why I say the two goals I scored in that 3-1 win at Old Trafford were the most important of my career.

I remember how I felt in the days before that game. My stomach and my insides were in knots because this was more than a football match. This was a game we had to win at all costs. The thought of us not winning that game was horrible.

Then we won and got to the final, and the sense of relief was amazing. The feeling in the dressing room was incredible.

Liverpool
Manager: Kenny Dalglish

Staunton, Barnes, Ablett, Whelan, Beardsley, Gaynor, Hodge, Wilson, Grobbelaar, Sutton, Hansen, McMahon, Aldridge, Chapman, Clough, Walker, Nicol, Houghton, Parker, Pearce

Nottingham Forest
Manager: Brian Clough

Match winner... Aldridge celebrates scoring against Forest

> "I have had many difficult days trying to come to terms with the reality that supporters came to watch me play a football match and died doing so"

To have that much pressure on you and to play the way we did, in tribute to those who had been lost, meant so much to us.

Beating Everton in the FA Cup final a few weeks later was important, but that Forest game was the one that I will never forget."

Interview by Kevin Palmer

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